

HEARING THE VOICES OF FOUR AFRICAN AMERICAN GRANDMOTHERS  
RAISING THEIR ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL GRANDCHILDREN

A Dissertation

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine and interpret the lived experiences and parenting practices of four African American grandmothers raising grandchildren in one urban school district. A disproportionate number of custodial grandmothers raising grandchildren are African American. There is a void where the voices of African American grandmothers raising academically successful grandchildren are limited. Specifically, regarding their personal attributes, acts of grandmothering, and their perceptions about grandmothering to support academic achievement.

Although each grandmother faced obstacles and made sacrifices, findings from this study reveals that African American grandmothers believe they can raise academically successful grandchildren to become productive members of society despite the negative life events precipitating their new living arrangements. Participants acknowledged a strong parental and spiritual influence in their own lives played a major roles in how they parented their grandchildren. The grandmothers expressed the importance of limiting or eliminating the interactions their grandchildren had with their absent parent while they carried out their role of parent. The thoughts, voices, expressions, and actions conveyed by the grandmothers provide a clear commitment to the needs of their grandchildren over all else. This research recommends further study regarding African American grandmothers raising academically successful grandchildren to provide insight to educators, policy makers, and other grandmothers raising grandchildren.

## DEDICATION

*“I say this because I know the plans I am planning for you,” says the LORD. “I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.” - (Jeremiah 29:11).*

This study is dedicated in memory of my grandparents, the late Jim Clifford (JC) Childress and Zelma Lee Glaze Childress. Your unconditional love and faith in my ability to succeed set me on a path to excellence at a very early age. Thank you for teaching me how to love, forgive, and the value of hard work. I wish you were here to see how your legacy continues to flourish. I miss you both dearly.

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To other members of my family and dear friends, thank you for your constant support and love on this lifetime of educational pursuit. You may now stop asking, “Aren’t you done yet?” Here are the fruits of my labor!

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All work of this dissertation was completed by the student, under the advisement of Professor Norvella P. Carter of the Department of Teaching Learning and Culture.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2000 United States Census reported 4.5 million grandchildren living in grandparent-headed households, a 30% increase since 1990. According to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, there are approximately 7.5 million grandchildren living with grandmothers, a 51% increase since 2000. The highest percentage is among African Americans (Cabin, 2013). Of these grandparent-headed families (GHF), 85.4% were households with some parental presence, and 14.6% without any parental presence (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). This phenomenon is also evident in Canada, Mexico and Britain (Whitley & Fuller-Thompson, 2017; Ellis & Simmons, 2014; Edwards & Ray, 2010).

Five family arrangements concerning GHF have been identified by researchers: both grandparents with some parental presence; both grandparents without any parental presence; grandmother only with some parental presence; grandmother only without any parental presence; grandfather only (Casper & Bryson, 1998).

The fact that grandmothers have already parented one generation of children, they might bring greater wisdom and experience to the role of parenting their grandchildren. Many are doing what they saw their mothers do. Some view parenting again as allowing them to avoid the same or similar mistakes they made parenting their own children (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006).

Over the past 50 years, the family structure in the U.S. has changed, necessitating the acknowledgment and support of grandmothers raising grandchildren (Hayslip, Smith, Montoro-Rodriguez, Streider, & Merchant, 2017). Although this phenomenon has

become a growing trend amongst many American households, much of current literature addresses why grandmothers have taken on the responsibility of parenting their grandchildren, the financial burdens they often experience, and the health concerns of this group of advanced aged parents who are parenting for the second time. There is very little literature available, if at all, that addresses the educational impact of these children raised by grandmothers and how they are faring with caregivers who are older and parenting their school aged grandchildren.

### **Root Causes**

An increasing number of studies describe the circumstances, relations, problems, and benefits of grandchildren raised in grandparent-headed households. Research theorize this new family formation is a function of negative life events and includes “nine Ds”: divorce, desertion, drug use, death, diseases, delivery (teen pregnancy), detention (incarceration), departure (immigration), and deployment (Edwards & Ray, 2010; Ellis & Simmons, 2014). Each of these functions causes discontinuity and places children at increased risk of emotional and behavioral problems in and out of school (Kelly, Whitley, & Campos, 2011).

### **Divorce**

Bramlett and Mosher (2001) cited U.S. data that suggests *divorce* occurs in almost 40% of marriages within the first 15 years. Typically parents experience distress due to finances and psychological challenges before, during, and after divorce. This far-reaching adjustment often causes mothers to seek assistance from their parents, changing living arrangements (Edwards & Ray, 2010).

## **Desertion**

Children neglected by their parents sometimes suffer *desertion*, in which case grandmothers must frequently fill in the parenting void. These children experience significant adjustment challenges and require interventions to recover from such devastation. Such abandonment leaves children with diminished self-worth and may cause long-term negative behaviors (Edwards & Ray, 2010).

## **Drug Use**

*Drug use* by parents represents another distinctive antecedent to grandmothers parenting again. Parents who abuse drugs often abuse their children emotionally and physically. Drug abuse most often include alcohol, cocaine and methamphetamines. When abuse is identified, state agencies usually remove children from their parent's care. The crack cocaine and methamphetamine epidemics are affecting a large number of women who are parents to children under the age of 18. In 1999, an estimated 72% of female federal inmates were there because of drug-related offenses (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, Kaplan & Sasser, 1996). Placement with a grandmother is most likely the option or they will be placed in foster care or with other relatives (Edwards & Ray, 2010).

## **Death**

The *death* of a parent is another reason children live with grandmothers (Fuller-Thompson & Minkler, 2001). It is reported that approximately two million children under the age of 18 experience the death of a parent annually in the U.S. Parental death can be very traumatic for children and may be manifested in anxiety, depression, and decreased academic performance (Haine, Ayers, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2008).

## **Disease**

In addition to drug abuse and incarceration, *diseases* such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic are also a major contributing factor in children being raised by their grandmothers (Fuller-Thompson & Minkler, 2001). Parents suffering from HIV/AIDS are often unable to provide adequate care for their children, necessitating they reside with grandmothers. These illnesses can also cause substantial challenges for grandmothers who must care for the ill adult son or daughter and raise the children (Edwards & Ray, 2010). According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2006, 46% of new HIV infections were among African Americans (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). By the end of 2008, estimates indicate that 1,178,350 people were living with HIV/AIDS. Of those in the U.S. living with the disease and those who had succumbed to the disease, 65% were African American (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

## **Delivery**

Teenage pregnancy and *delivery* rates have been on the decline in recent years. However, in 2015, there were 22.3 births per 1,000 girls or approximately 229,715 babies born to teen mothers aged 15-19 (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Matthews, 2017). Teens are usually unprepared to become parents and their parents often assume the role of parent and primary caregiver (Strom & Strom, 2000; Dowdell, 2005).

## **Deployment**

Families with both parents serving in the military may experience *deployment* at the same time in war zones. Their children are often sent to live with grandmothers (Lamberg, 2004). This cause of grandmothers raising grandchildren brings on unique stressors for both grandmother and the children under their care. In 2006, the Department of Defense reported that approximately 350,000 women were serving in the U.S. military representing approximately 15 percent of the active duty personnel (Department of Defense, 2015).

## **Detention**

*Detention* and the increase in the U.S. prison population has attributed to alarming number of children raised by grandmothers. Between 1990 and 1999, the number of men and women imprisoned in the U.S. increased substantially. The rate of incarceration in the U.S. is the highest in the world, with adult prison and jail populations of 1.5 million and 760,000 respectively in 2009 (Glaze E. , 2010, Walmsley, 2009). In 2007, approximately 50% of the adults in prison were parents with children under the age of 18, impacting 2.3% (1.7 million) of the nation's children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Mandatory sentencing, decreasing release rates, increasing lengths of sentences, are a few of the factors leading to this increase in the prison population. The greater increase and repetitive nature of female offenders, more stringent sentencing guidelines, and the disregard for gender in sentencing policies associated with drug-related crimes have led to the drastic increase of an estimated 1 in every 28 children having a parent in prison (Dalley, 2002; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010).

Between 1995 and 2003, the annual increase in women in prison and jails was 5.2%, compared to 3.4% annual increase in the number of males incarcerated. This staggering number makes female offenders the fastest growing population of inmates in the U.S. Glaze & Maruschak (2010) discovered racial disparities still exist; African American women are three times more likely than White women to be incarcerated while Latinas are 69% more likely than White women to be incarcerated (Bell, 2008; Kaminsky, 2013).

### **Departure**

Finally, a vast number of parents *depart* countries where they live due to impoverished conditions. South and Central America, Africa and the Caribbean are just a few such countries. Parents often search for employment opportunities in other countries, including the U.S. They often leave their children in the care of grandmothers (Edwards & Ray, 2010).

The precipitating factors that result in a new family structure often pejoratively affect children, parent, and the grandmothers charged with their care (Hayslip & Patrick, 2003). All members of the family are at risk of experiencing physical and social-emotional problems. The severity of these problems is a function of the reason for the change in caregiver arrangements, the cognitive capacity of the child, the level of the grandmother's vitality, and the broader ecological environments involved (Edwards & Ray, 2008; Cox, 2008).

## **Personal Story**

Growing up, I remember life before my mother remarried and life after my mother remarried, there was a difference. Before my mother remarried, I was the youngest of four girls and I remember getting my sisters in trouble and tattling like a parrot. Then at the age of ten, my mother remarried and I inherited a stepfather and four step-siblings. It felt like the Brady Bunch. One major difference between my family and the Brady Bunch was by the time my mother remarried, there was only four kids left at home; my biological sister who was four years older than me, a stepsister who was two years older than me, a stepbrother who was five years old, and me. Oh, did things change.

I was always a good student and very independent at a young age. My family was a major influence growing up. I had a very close extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. We spent a lot of time together and had big birthday parties, holiday celebrations, and weekly dinners at my grandparents' home. I remember my grandparents being very involved in our lives and protecting us when we go into trouble. Every weekend was spent at my grandparents' house with plenty of cousins to keep me company. I even remember a time when I was a toddler when my mother and my sisters and I lived with my grandparents for a brief time. This was following my mother's separation from my father, of which I have very limited memories.

I don't remember formally having long conversations about education and expectations, I just remember having very smart sisters growing up who always helped me with my homework and always made good grades, we all did. However, of my



biological sisters, I am the only one who went on to pursue higher education following high school graduation. Being an educator was not part of my plans after graduation, however, I think it became my calling.

At the start of my career as an administrator working in an urban school district, I realized most of the parent conferences and parent contacts I made as a result of my charge to assist teachers with student behavior and to administer consequences were not with parents, but rather with grandparents, most often grandmothers, struggling to keep their broken families together. I will never forget the day one grandmother came to school to assist me and to volunteer to help with a school-wide fundraiser. As we sat preparing to distribute the fundraiser products to parents as they arrived for Open House, we quickly began a conversation about her two grandchildren under her care. She soon revealed she and her husband, both who were past retirement age and both experiencing serious health diagnosis, had been the primary caregivers for her two grandchildren after their mother, her daughter, could no longer care for them because of her drug addiction and frequent incarcerations. She expressed great concern for and stress over the financial strain, educational needs, and generation gap as result of the unexpected responsibility of parenting again. Additionally, she fretted over what would happen to her two grandchildren if she and/or her husband succumbed to their health diagnosis prior to her grandchildren graduating from high school. Although, charged with the difficult responsibility of parenting again, this grandmother believed the current arrangement was a much better alternative than her grandchildren being placed in foster care.

Consequently, I reflected upon my own family dynamic that resulted in my

parents parenting the second time around as they raised my niece, the daughter my oldest biological sisters, and my nephews, the sons of my only biological brother. My niece came to live with my parents at the age of two years old, following the divorce of my sister and a drug addiction that left her unable to properly care for her only child. I remember the dynamics of my family at that time that made this arrangement more difficult. I was twelve years old when my niece came to live with us and my mother had recently married my stepfather, who was not pleased with the arrangement. I remember overhearing many late night and early morning conversations between my mom and stepfather regarding my sister's drug addiction and my mother caring for her then only grandchild.

At the time I was the youngest child and only one left at home and as a result was charged with helping my mother care for my niece. I remember combing her hair for pre-school and helping her get dressed before going to school myself. As I became a teenager, I remember taking her with me to activities to hopefully keep some of the confusion and conversations at bay because of my mother's decision to care for her.

When I was a junior at the University of Houston, I took my niece who was then a freshman in high school, to live with me at my apartment off campus. I was a full-time student and working full-time when I decided to help my mother out by becoming the caregiver for my niece. She lived with me until the day I married in 1998.

History repeated itself when my brother became a father at the age of 20 years old. Soon after becoming a father, he became a single parent caring for his first son. My nephew came to live with my brother at my parent's home at the age of 3 months old

following a routine weekend visit. This arrangement was different from the arrangement with my niece, as my stepfather was my brother's biological father. My mother and stepfather became primary caregivers when my brother was awarded sole custody when my nephew was a year and a half. Shortly afterwards, my brother's job required him to travel out of state for months at a time. Years later, my brother was briefly incarcerated leaving my nephew in my parent's custody until he returned. When he returned home, my nephew stayed in my parents care. I again became a secondary caregiver for a child of one of my siblings. Years later my brother fathered another son, with the same mother as his first son. My mother and stepfather also raised him for a brief time when CPS intervened and placed him in my brother's custody and removed his mother's other two children.

I vividly remember the difference when my niece came to live with my mom and stepfather and when my nephew came to live with us. My niece was not the biological grandchild of my stepfather and I remember often hearing the conversations and arguments about the decisions her mother, my sister, made that precipitated the living arrangements. Since my niece and my brother were only two years apart in age, it was also obvious to see how my stepfather doted on my brother and my mother often had to argue with my stepfather when making sure that my niece had some of the same material things my brother got without asking. I saw the same privilege and dotting bestowed on my nephew that was given to my brother. Although I was only a pre-teen when my niece came to live with us and I was a married adult when my parents were raising my nephew, I took responsibility and began helping my mother as she parented my niece. I became

her other guardian.

As my parents began to age and my oldest nephew became a teenager, he also came to live with me and attended the middle school where I was an administrator. He lived under my care until my stepfather's health began to fail and he returned to my parent's home to help care for my stepfather and attend a magnet high school in the area. He remained with my mother after my stepfather's death until he graduated high school and attended college in another city. He is now in the U.S. Army.

When I first embarked on this research journey, I was drawn to the phenomena because of a brief conversation I had with a grandparent as I served as her grandson's assistant principal. However, as I pondered my own personal story and family dynamic, I realized I could trace my family history of grandparents raising grandchildren back to the 1940's when my mother's oldest brother made the decision to stay in Midway, Texas with my maternal great-grandmother as the rest of the family relocated to Houston, TX. My uncle decided he wanted to stay and live with my great-grandmother so he could continue to go to school in Midway with one of my maternal cousins, whom he shared a relationship as a brother. Although the decision to stay with my maternal great-grandmother was not due to any of the reasons attributed to this research, nonetheless, my eldest maternal uncle was raised by my great-grandmother. After graduating high school in Midway, my uncle relocated to Houston with the rest of the family.

As my maternal grandparents packed up and relocated from Midway to Houston with my mother and her then six other siblings, they too had a granddaughter they were raising. My mother's oldest sister became pregnant in her late teens. Immediately after

birth, the child remained with my grandparents after finding out my aunt was going to place her in the care of a family in Houston. A couple of years later, my aunt again gave birth to another daughter whom my maternal grandparents also raised. Both granddaughters remained in the care of my maternal grandparents until their mid-teen years when their father intermittently took them to live with him and the woman in his life at the time. Although my aunt, the mother of the two granddaughters raised by my maternal grandparents, did not raise her own daughters, after her youngest daughter became pregnant as a teen and gave birth to a son, she raised her grandson from infancy until he was a teen and became incarcerated, where he remains today.

My maternal grandparents gave birth to thirteen children. Three died at birth or shortly after birth. Of the ten living children, two daughters (one being my mother) and one son also raised at least one grandchild from infancy until they graduated high school and all of which entered or graduated from college.

Now as a principal, I think back on conversations I've had with grandparents, often grandmothers, coming into my office to discuss grades, behavior, or attendance for their grandchild. I often ponder, the contributing factors that afforded some to successfully navigate through the mitigating circumstances of their disrupted family structure. I have even witnessed grandchildren raised in the same household, by the same grandmother, yet one experiences academic success, while another might have more difficulty adjusting to the disruption.

As an educational leader, this phenomenon is alarming. I witness the social, emotional, educational, and behavioral impact children experience as they attempt to

navigate in school and out of school settings. As an aunt and secondary caregiver, sometimes primary caregiver, to my niece and nephew, I know the obstacles children experiencing this plight must face. As a daughter of a mother who has raised grandchildren, I also see the financial, emotional, physical, and psychological strain and stress it places on aging grandparents charged to care for grandchildren. This phenomenon under investigation represents a growing dilemma for many grandmothers as they must make a decision to allow their grandchildren to enter the public care system or take them into their homes. For many, there is no decision to be made...family care at all cost.

As an educational leader who is charged with serving others, I hope this study will benefit other educators, educational leaders, counselors, and all staff serving students in public and private schools across the nation and even abroad. As I have successfully matriculated from being a student, to a teacher, to an assistant principal, and now to the role of principal, I am committed to seize each and every opportunity to meet the needs of students in an out of school settings. I accept and embrace my role, beyond the standardized scores that causes anxiety for many and places labels on students, as one responsible for assisting and supporting teachers and school administrators and being a role model for students, families and communities navigating through systems and obstacles that may inhibit academic success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

*“Black women have resilience, whether we like it or not.” Maya Angelou*

The theoretical framework utilized in the study is Womanist Theory. Womanist

Theory was born in 1983 out of the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Walker in her search for a theory that was relevant in the lives of African American woman. As part of an African-centered belief system, Womanist thought is a derivative from pre-colonial African practices rooted in independent African womanhood (Abdullah, 2012). The term “Womanism” was coined by Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* to describe the realities of “women of color.” Walker highlighted a concept that breaks feminism barriers creating a discourse including woman of various classes.

Butler (2007) asserted the necessity for the term was birthed from the earlier feminist movement led by middle-class white women advocating for social change focused primarily on gender-based oppression. However, this movement disregarded racism founded on class and race. To counter this trend, Womanists argued African American and other women of color experience a different type of oppression (p.77). Allowing these voices and experiences to arise in research creates a space that honors and validates the wholeness of the population under investigation.

Hill-Collins contributed to the concept by positing African American women as agents of knowledge based on their rich lived experiences as expressed through their narratives. These experiences are communicated in thoughts and behaviors involving an ‘ethic of caring’ and personal responsibility for family and community. Comas-Dias further broaden the concept to encompass the spirituality of women of color. Spirituality along with cultural values and behaviors are paramount in shaping an African American woman’s identity and power to combat oppression (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Comas-Diaz,

2008; Wyche, 2016).

Phillips and McCaskill (1995) proposed Womanism and Womanist Theory is grounded in the reality and empowering voices of African American woman about their own unique everyday experiences and their approach to solving practical problems. This anti-oppressionist vernacular values African American womanhood as a foundational speaking position to openly and autonomously address everyday problems, thereby igniting social justice, activism, and ending all forms of oppression. Scholars (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Thomas, 1998; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995) contend hearing the dialogue of these once hushed voices are conduits to the healing and restoration of the balance between mankind and nature that will reconnect humanity to the spirit realm.

Thomas (1998) further argues that womanist thought is a critical reflection of African American women's position in the world God created and takes their experiences seriously as individuals created in the image of God (p. 489). Lindsay-Dennis (2015) asserted womanist epistemology allows researchers to examine the intergenerational survival and parenting practices "including mothering, dialoguing, using mutual aid/self-help, and spirituality as a means of solving problems." These parenting practices are transmitted directly and indirectly from one generation to the next by mothers, grandmothers, and other women views as mothers to help their "children" navigate through multiple spaces. "Womanism stress the importance of viewing intergenerational strategies of survival as an intuitive and measurable process (p. 511)." To add credence to this view, Abdullah (2012) used womanist theoretical praxis to examine ways in which African American womanists mother children (p. 60).



Research state womanist thought serves as a salient praxis by which African American women mother children, navigate relationships, interact with power sources, and shape children into productive citizens (Abdullah, 2012). According to Lindsay-Dennis (2015), this framework encourages researchers to examine survival strategies used by grandmothers raising grandchildren as equipoise to navigate among people, nature, and the spiritual realm. This strength-oriented interpretation authenticates the voice of African American grandmothers as the central focus for this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

An alarming number of American grandmothers are not finding themselves retiring and traveling during their later years. Instead, they are putting off doing the things they might have planned and many are unexpectedly parenting their grandchildren. There are millions of grandmothers across the country taking on the primary role of caregiver and becoming parents again. Although they love and care deeply for their grandchildren, in many cases, assuming this role was not an intended experience (Ross & Aday, 2006).

This substantial increase occurs in homes regardless of income, background, race, or presence or absence of the parents of these children. African American children are more likely (13%) to live in grandparent maintained households than White children (3.9%) or Hispanic children (5.7%). While almost half of these households include the mother of these children, approximately one million American families consist of grandmothers raising their grandchildren without one of children's parents. Furthermore, 1 in 20 children, under the age of 18, live in a grandparent-headed home without either

parent present (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002; Musil, et al., 2011). Therefore, additional studies are warranted.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to hear the voices, life experiences, and parenting practices of African American grandmothers who raised academically successful grandchildren into adulthood. The study examines a narrowly defined group of non-traditional families, i.e. grandmothers raising grandchildren. The grandmothers in this study experienced some, albeit sporadic, parental support. The grandmothers are responsible for making all decisions pertaining to the wellbeing of grandchild(ren).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to provide insights to educators, school leaders, and policymakers to appreciate and help these African American grandmothers and support the grandchildren under their care. Educators, school leaders, and policy makers can use this research to gain insight related to grandmothers who have raised grandchildren who have successfully graduate high school. Grandmothers across the nation can also learn from this study to reflect upon their own rich experiences.

Thomson and McLanahan (2012) found most children placed in custodial care of a grandparent come from homes where biological parents cannot or will not care for them. Thomson and McLanahan further contended educators and sociologists have expressed concern over the number of juvenile offenders (over 50%) coming from homes lacking two parent caregivers. As a result, special services and resources are needed to help many grandparents deal with the behavioral and psychological effects the family

circumstances have on their grandchildren.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine and (re)interpret the life experiences and parenting practices of four successful African American grandmothers in one urban area.

The following questions will guide this study:

- 1) How do African American grandmothers describe their personal attributes related to their grandmothering?
- 2) How do African American grandmothers exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering?
- 3) How do African American grandmothers describe their perceptions about grandmothering to support student academic achievement?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic Success:** Term used to describe one who has completed requirements to earn a high school diploma.

**African American or Black:** Term used to describe a diverse group of Americans with ethnic origin from The Caribbean or African Culture. A term used post-Civil Rights era to describe American born citizens of African descent (Bennett, 1970).

**Grandmothers:** The biological female grandparent who undertakes maternal support.

**Grandmothering:** The act of a biological grandmother taking care of or raising one in the same manner as a parent.

**Grandmother-headed household:** Living arrangement of biological grandchild maintained by grandmother regardless of the presence or absence of a biological parent

(Casper & Bryson, 1998).

**Grandparenting:** The act of a biological grandmother or grandfather taking care or raising one in the same manner as a parent.

**Urban:** Plots of land with dense populations of people consisting of at least 1,000 individuals per square mile (Kinhole, 2010).

**Voices:** Expressions and knowledge of lived experiences, based on one's values, beliefs, needs, concerns, and principles.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

There is nothing unusual about grandmothers called upon to assist during a family crisis or time of trouble. What is new is the growing number of grandmothers who are unexpectedly called on to take over as primary caregivers for their minor grandchildren. In 2012, of the 65 million grandparents in the United States, approximately 3% or 4.2 million of all households and 10% or 7 million of children reside in households with grandparents as the householder (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). The phenomenon of children raised by grandmothers is a rapidly rising issue across our nation.

The large number of nontraditional family arrangements indicates a shift in development of the conventional family made up of father, mother, and their children. Because of the changes in the family structure, grandparenting has experienced a transformation. Fewer grandmothers experience the “love them and leave them” model of grandparenting in times past (Chalfie, 1994). Many grandmothers express an initial desire to take on the responsibility of surrogate parents for their grandchildren. However, they concede that there is also a significant amount of stress related to the long-term commitment involved in their decision (Whitley & Kelly, 2008, p. 39).

There are myriad reasons why these children are being raised by grandmothers and not their parents. Children who are under the care of Children Protective Services need to be placed in custodial care until the parent is able to provide adequate care. Often the ideal place is with a grandmother. These unfortunate circumstances have caused

many families to be in a state of crisis, necessitating grandmothers to intervene in the best interest of the children (Cox, 2008). Although committed to their grandchildren, the challenges encountered when parenting grandchildren can impede the ability to provide a supportive home environment, increasing the psychological distress of both. This prevalent occurrence requires scholarly examination.

Goyer (2006) wrote the experience of grandparents raising their school-aged grandchildren is such a familiar occurrence that it has generated acronyms such as Grandparents as Parents (GAP) and Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRGs). Usually, grandmothers are the responsible parties seeing to the educational needs of their custodial grandchildren. In African American families, this is especially prevalent (Boyer, 2015).

Grandmothers who are the principal caregivers for their grandchildren are regarded as custodial grandmothers. Literature on the subject indicates that this role is often an involuntary role of custodial or surrogate parent with little or no forewarning (Cox, 2008). Raising a child changes life at any age, but raising a grandchild unexpectedly can turn life upside down. Grandmothers taking on the role of primary caregiver for their grandchildren tend to face elevated levels of stress. As a result, it can negatively impact their social, emotional, and physical well-being. In addition, the children under their care may encounter setbacks in psychological development, adjustment difficulties, and educational functioning (Edwards & Mumford, 2005, p. 18). These encounters may not result from being raised by grandmothers, but rather the result of the circumstances that led to the change in parental responsibility.

It is important to note many grandmothers have taken on the role of parent with great success. In such circumstances, grandchildren function effectively as children and as adults. For instance, former Presidents Obama and Clinton spent a portion of their childhood in the care of their grandmothers (Doucette-Dudman, as cited in Edwards & Mumford, 2005). Some children raised by grandmothers faced better health, academic achievement, and fewer behavioral problems. These grandmothers have passionately provided stability, unconditional love and structure that was missing from the lives of the grandchildren (Marx & Solomon, 2000).

### **Custodial Grandmothers**

Whitley, Kelley, and Sipe (2001) conducted a 3-year study regarding African American grandparents raising their grandchildren. They found there is a rapid increase in the trend of being a caregiver to a blood-related child in the U.S. and this trend is associated with national social changes such as rising unemployment, higher divorce rates, and cuts in federal government funding for social services. Despite the negative implications of this phenomenon, the authors of this study found children raised by grandparents exhibited a better sense of well-being than their counterparts raised by a biological parent experiencing financial and personal struggles. Grandparents were found to experience positive outcomes including a second chance to do things right, an opportunity to foster a familial legacy for their grandchildren, love and companionship, and many reported an increase in feelings of usefulness and purpose. This was true for both African American and European grandparents (Harper, Hardesty, & Woody, 2001; Whitley, Kelley, & Sipe, 2001).

Martin (2008) found according to national studies the vast majority of grandparents raising grandchildren are women. Researchers associated with the Urban Institue and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago found African American children are 4-5 times more likely than non-Hispanic White children to live at grandmother's house (Minkler & Fuller-Thompson, 2005).

Grandmothers charged with the care and custody of their school-aged grandchildren may be handicapped more than others regarding the eduational needs of their grandchildren and assisting outside of school because of the many years that lapsed since they attended school. Subjects such as mathematics may leave these grandmothers experiencing feelings of inadequacy as they attempt to navigate homework and other school assignments. The formal eduational experiences of these grandmothers differ greatly when compared to the requirements necessary to meet the academic demands of their grandchildren (Boyer, 2015).

### **Historical Context**

In the past two decades, there has been a major change in the structure and make-up of the nuclear family structure. As a result, researchers, policy makers, and the media began to notice the drastic rise in households maintained by grandparents in 1990. This rise prompted questioning why this phenomenon was occurring. To answer this burning question, analytical research began in the early to mid-90s to examine grandmothers as caregivers (Chalfie, 1994; Kelch-Oliver, 2011). Shortly after researchers began focusing on the growing number of children being raised by grandmothers, federal lawmakers also began to take note. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives acknowledged the



significance of the rising trend as establishing a vital issue for public policy. As a result, a Congressional hearing was held on the subject in 1992 (Casper & Bryson, 1998). The Senate inquiry was centered on the causes of the trend (U.S. Senate, 1992), while the House inquiry focused on the new role and responsibilities of grandmothers (U.S. House of Representatives, 1992). Both hearings addressed policy deficits on the topic of grandparent rights and access to public assistance (Casper & Bryson, 1998).

Ruggles (1994) postulated the prevalence of children residing in households without their parents is not a new occurrence amongst the African American culture. In fact, studies reveal from 1880 to 1960, African American children were two to three times more likely than their white counterparts to reside in a residence without one or both parents. A number of social theorists have contended slavery was a leading cause of the change within the African American family structure. They further contend the extended family structure was a means of managing both poverty and the growing occurrence of single parentage (Allen, 1979; Billingsley, 1968; Fisher, Beasley, & Harber, 1968; Hofferth, 1984; Rainwater & Yancey, 1967; Stack, 1974).

### **Traditional Roles of African American Grandmothers**

African American grandmothers are often the matriarch of the family as many grandfathers are in poor health, have succumbed to death, or have engaged in behaviors that are reckless and negligent. As a result, African American grandmothers have availed themselves to the role of caregiver to their grandchildren in the absence of responsible parents. African American grandmothers have been the moral support of African American families for generations. In their role as matriarch, African American

grandmothers have reinforced family values and reemphasize the role of religion, self-respect, hard work, and a life of discipline (Cuddenback, 2004; Ruiz & Zhu, 2004).

Barber (2010) contended most African American grandmothers deem bonding with kin, spirituality, religion, educational success, and a good work ethic as essential values for their grandchildren to uphold and live by. These values are conveyed and communicated to their grandchildren at family gatherings, through phone calls, and their presence and involvement in school and extra-curricular activities their grandchildren participate in. Social needs of grandchildren in their care and custody are also addressed with an emphasis on cultural values. What is missing in literature are resources and recommendation to assist African American grandmothers who are often unexpectedly called upon to deal with the formal educational needs of their school-aged grandchildren.

### **Role of Extended Family**

Grandparents are often found volunteering to assist in the schools their grandchild attend. They can be found attending field trips, assisting teachers with instruction, and performing other classroom duties as needed. Many school projects are completed with the help of a grandparent. This is not a new occurrence since 75% of parents of school-aged children are employed during the school day (Fischer & Schaffer, 1993).

Research shows a strong relationship between grandparent and grandchild benefits the entire family (Wright, 2009). When a loving and caring bond exists between grandmothers and their young grandchildren, there is an increased likelihood that the grandchild will make healthy choices in adulthood. Social interactions, specifically between grandparents and grandchildren are also found to build strong bonds that can

lead to adult grandchildren caring for their aged grandparents (Silverstein, 2007).

African American grandmothers have historically been the pillar of strength and resilience shouldering the responsibility for the survival of both the family and the community. This caretaking culture extends back to the African ethos revering older men and woman as the religious leaders holding important significance, including the responsibility of naming the children. African tenants emphasized kinship obligations transcending the biological family (Foster, 1983; Genovese, 1976).

In the plantation fields of the Antebellum South, the central role of respect and significance of African American grandmothers endured as they maintained a fluid role that included meeting the needs of their household, the purveyors of medicine, and birthing African American babies born into slavery as well as the babies of their white owners. As mothers were forced into the fields to work alongside men, older women took on the role of fictive kin (Gutman, 1976). Grandmothers took on the role of mothers of their grandchildren and those orphaned by slavery. They were the visionary storytellers of the family offering the grandchildren counter-narratives detailing their white owners with less power than the reality of the brutal life lived in slavery (Close, 1997).

After Reconstruction, poverty shaped the lived experiences of African American women as many older women outlived their children, many left their children as they went to find work. Grandmothers in the South were often the status holders of the community, as their homes became boarding houses, and they sold food in the marketplace. Men were often out working as long as their health allowed, leaving the

older women to be the strong bond that held the family together. Grandchildren were often left in their care to help grandmothers as they became the main authority figure for grandchildren, raising them as their own. As African American grandmothers aged and became ill, the grandchildren became their caregivers, helping them with chores. Temporary living arrangements of grandmothers with kin and fictive kin relatives often became permanent as mothers continued to leave home to find work and grandmothers spent more time with the grandchildren than their mothers (Jimenez, 2002). African American such as Frederick Douglas, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou have written autobiographies filled with rich narratives of grandmothers as the repositories of family narratives and traditions with hard work as the central theme conveying hope, internal will, and perseverance to overcome oppression.

In times past, views of grandmothers were synonymous with the view of the elderly. Grandmothers were viewed as frail, old fashioned, and out of touch with the current lifestyle trends. Today's view of grandmothers is very different (Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003). Grandmothers are younger, living longer, and likely to be healthy (Aldous, 1995). In 1995, at least 75 percent of older Americans were grandmothers and approximately 50 percent were great-grandmothers (Woodworth, as cited in Reynolds, Wright & Beale, 2003). However, in 1995, one-half of all American grandmothers were under 60 years of age and one-half of those were 55 years or younger. These facts indicate that most grandmothers are not members of the elderly population (Simon-Rusinowitz & Krach, 1996). Reynolds, Wright, and Beale (2003) noted the age of grandmothers' range from 30-110, with the median age between 53-57

years old.

Glass and Honeycutt (2002) cited grandparenting, in some ways, has become a new experience in the last 100 years. Life expectancy and good health has increased, affording them an opportunity to spend more time with their grandchildren. Those who have retired have more flexibility that was not allowed by their careers. Grandmothers who are not raising their grandchildren admit having the best of both worlds. They get to spend quality time with their grandchildren engaging in fun activities. Without the boundaries of parenting, they can also spoil their grandchildren and send them home to their parents (Billig, 1993).

The experience for grandmothers who take on the role of parenting is vastly different. In some ways, they lose the special grandchild-grandparent relationship that makes being a grandmother so wonderful. They forfeit the visits, opportunities to spoil, and conspiracies that many grandchild-grandmother relationships share (Glass & Honeycutt, 2002). As grandmothers parent their grandchildren, they report experiencing considerable social and emotional intrusions in their lives. It is logical to assume they are denied a major developmental opportunity many anticipated. Grandmothers also consistently report major losses and adjustments experienced as they take on this unplanned role of parenting their grandchildren (Glass & Honeycutt, 2002).

### **Role of Age**

The variation in the age of grandmothers and their grandchildren makes a difference in the well-being of grandmothers and the manner in which they interact with their grandchildren. Half of the grandchildren living in homes maintained by

grandmothers are under the age of six (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002). Grandmothers are not younger parents with endless energy; some are living with health issues that might add further limitations. The behaviors of teenagers can also be difficult for grandmothers to navigate. Many of these grandchildren have experienced neglect or abuse that contributes to more behavior issues that are unfamiliar to some grandmothers (Dowdell, 2005).

Grandmothers have reported enrolling their grandchildren in mentoring programs to assist them in their grandchildren's participation in activities. The restrictions due to age and health problems can be disheartening, as they desire to provide opportunities for their grandchildren to participate as other children (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Dolbin-MacNab (2006) shared the words of a widowed grandmother, who was raising her grandchildren:

They want to go places at night, and I don't do well driving at night. So, that's a big issue with them, but it goes along with aging. Also, your heart starts failing, and you don't have the energy you had when you are younger and had your kids.

Age can also alter a grandmother's approach to discipline. The energy and effort it can take to organize their home with new roles and responsibilities can be tiring. Issues such as household chores, friends, dress, and dating can be overwhelming for older adults charged with parenting again. These issues can make parenting as grandmothers more challenging than parenting their own children (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006).

Conversely, some grandmothers have reported the experience of raising their grandchildren has added joy and meaning to their lives. These grandmothers report that

their grandchildren provide companionship and meaningful focus for their social and familial roles. The kin-keeping function serves an important role in their family and society. Despite the increased stress, some grandmothers enjoy the rewards they experience from their custodial role. The self-satisfaction of helping their grandchildren in a time of need, receipt of God's blessings, reason to continue living, and the emotional wellbeing from knowing their grandchildren are safe and cared for gives them comfort (Burton, 1992; Moore & Miller, 2007).

### **Health Concerns**

For many grandmothers, their plan to relax and enjoy a voluntary relationship with their grandchildren has been replaced with parental accountability. As a result, a great amount of social and emotional intrusions alters their lives and can substantially impact mental health. Researchers in adult development agree that as grandmothers accept the role of parenting, they are denied their own developmental age and stage-appropriate activities (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002; Williams, 2011).

The health of grandmothers may suffer as a result of the time and effort to care for grandchildren. The new role of caregiver may cause grandmothers to overlook their own health issues as they attend to the physical and emotional well-being of their grandchildren. Some of the stressors from parenting again may lead to additional physical, emotional and medical illnesses (Marx & Solomon, 2000). A national study by Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, and Driver (1997) found that grandmothers raising their grandchildren were twice as likely to suffer clinical depression when compared to grandmothers in a more traditional role.

The anxiety and fear of the future of their grandchildren can also add stress. Questions surface such as: What will happen to the children if something happens to me? What if the parents resurface? What if the system allows the children to return to their parents before they can adequately care for them? How will all of this affect the children? (Williams, 2011)

Many of these children have suffered themselves as a result of their parents and their displaced state. In order to meet the needs of the grandchildren in their care, these grandmothers may need the support of mental health professionals to positively impact their grandmothering (Edwards, 2018). Most qualitative studies have found significant health issues amid grandchildren raised by grandmothers. Hyperactivity, learning delays, and other behavioral and health concerns can result from drug exposure, neglect, and childhood stress (Minkler, Roe, & M., 1992; Williams, 2011). Research documents high rates of asthma, weakened immune systems, poor eating and sleeping habits, and physical disabilities (Ross & Aday, 2006).

### **Parenting Styles**

Smith, Richardson and Palmieri (2006) found psychological distress in grandmothers raising grandchildren results in lower quality parenting. Conceivably parenting as grandmothers is influenced by the style they utilized when raising their own children. However, our society has changed drastically from past generations. In past generations, caregivers were afforded authority and control. Obeying and respecting your elders was emphasized and expected of children. Today, emphasis is placed on teaching children to be decision-makers (Strom & Strom, 2011). Children coming from



such environments might have difficulty following rules in a different environment.

Another point of contention and misunderstanding relates to differences in parents and grandmothers beliefs and values. Parents and grandmothers might have vastly different views on rewarding children and how discipline is applied. The decades that separate grandmothers' child-rearing and what the current generation embraces yields different expectations. Some grandmothers expect children to be "seen and not heard" and to obey without comment. Many parents expect children to discuss their thoughts and opinions and voice their agreement or disagreement. Such differences can cause great confusion and significant stress between grandmothers and their grandchildren (Edwards & Ray, 2010).

Grandmothers describe themselves as parenting in a "whole new world". This new society is often viewed as toxic to the grandchildren they are raising. Media, drugs, crime, open-minded attitudes towards sex, and peer pressure are stressors that cause grandmothers to worry about the wellbeing of their grandchildren and their ability to offset such influences (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). An important finding of current research is that with years of caregiving, grandmothers were better able to establish routines and an increased ability to cope and adjust to the demands of their new role (Ross & Aday, 2006).

### **Financial Concerns**

These grandmothers are faced with new financial demands that can be very stressful. In order to attend to their grandchildren, many must give up their dreams of retirement and relaxation and reorganize their lives. Some might even have to re-enter

the workforce to supplement their retirement income to meet their new financial demands. It can be a difficult process to re-enter the workforce after retirement (Guastaferro, Guastaferro, Katelyn, & Stuart, 2015).

Every facet of work, from a successful career to a well-earned retirement, can be at stake when grandmothers are unexpectedly raising grandchildren. The cost of childcare can be so expensive that grandmothers who are working quit work to save on the cost of childcare; others return to work to meet the expense of the kids. Some have lost their jobs due to their frequent request for needed time off to attend to and care for their grandchildren. There are others who have the good fortune of understanding employers who are accommodating (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002).

The quandary of working or not working can give rise to increased stress and issues of self-worth for some grandmothers. Many have worked for decades and have planned and looked forward to retirement. They planned their finances so that their pensions, retirement payments, savings, and social security payments would cover their expenses and retirement plans. When grandchildren arrive, their finances are used to afford food, clothing, school supplies, entertainment, medical bills, and sometimes legal fees associated with their new parenting role. Some have even sold their homes or taken a second mortgage on their homes to protect their grandchildren. The financial burdens can be quite severe for those with limited resources (Guastaferro, Guastaferro, Katelyn, & Stuart, 2015).

## **Educational Concerns**

Traditional values in the African American community emphasize the importance of an education. Education is believed to be the means to a productive life. Grandmothers want their grandchildren to focus on learning and not the opinions and socialization of peers (Gibson, 2005).

Belsky and Fearon (2002) found that children who have received positive parental or caregiver connections during their early childhood years encounter greater achievements in school than their classmates who experience disengaged relationships. A child's attachment to a primary caregiver helps the child to create expectations that form a mental set of standards. This internal framework develops from interacting with caregivers during early childhood and presents a structure for consecutive relationships and perceptions about self (Edwards & Ray, 2008). Attachment influences social-emotional and cognitive performance throughout life.

School children with a secure attachment are significantly more interested in social contact and are able to provide positive interactions with classmates. They also display greater self-esteem and can maintain friendships. As a result, the opportunity for favorable social-emotional development is increased. Interactions in the classroom differ for children securely attached to their teachers. Children insecurely attached often seek out more emotional support. This support can be sought through positive or negative avenues (Edwards & Ray, 2008).

An effective classroom environment for African American children raised by grandmothers must take into consideration the cultural capital these students bring with

them each day. Such culturally informed knowledge, values, and skills are points of reference as they interpret and make sense of their new experiences in school and out of school settings. Expressiveness, high levels of physical or sensory stimulation, and communalism mediate and guide the perceptions, behaviors, and values in the cognitive development of these children. Many scholars conclude children feel isolated, inferior, and often distance themselves when their realities are not incorporated into learning activities. (Ellison, Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000).

Children raised by grandmothers, whose prior experiences involved neglect, abuse or inconsistency, may develop insecure attachments. Discontinuity, separation, or major disruptions in the life of a child interferes with their internal framework. These disruptions can weaken their ability to relate to teachers and their classmates (Williams, 2011; Edwards, 2018).

A need for many grandmothers is for tutors to assist with assignments. Some grandmothers feel inept in assisting with homework and state mandated assessments in today's schools. Children raised by grandmothers have school related difficulties due to disciplinary reasons that might remove them from the classroom due to emotional and behavioral problems. When this occurs, it affects acquiring important learning (Kelch-Oliver, 2011).

Grandmothers may lack the experience of caring for modern children. Some are not familiar with children's interest such as video games, computers, and other similar activities. In addition, they may have difficulties navigating and understanding the current requirements of schools and contemporary subjects. However, they can be taught

to provide relevant school assistance (Edwards & Sweeney, 2007).

### **Benefits of Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren**

When families experience a disruption in the family structure, it is often the children who suffer the most. A new family structure, sometimes a new place to call home, and the absence of parents can be devastating for children who many times have already experienced traumatizing situations. Sometimes the bond of social and emotional ties with a loving grandmother can be the stability a child needs to thrive.

When grandmothers step in as a second-line of defense for their fractured family, this can be invaluable in the life and well-being of grandchildren. As a biological grandmother, one has a vested interest in the development and success of grandchildren. The stability of familial support is a building block for children and families to manage the anxiety and strain of these contemporary households. This support can be beneficial as these grandchildren face the perils and pressures to provide needed assistance and care to diffuse social stressor that are inevitable (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007).

Research found that grandchildren with close relationships with grandmothers have lower depression rates and reduced stress. In situations where the grandchild had a close relationship with their parents and grandmother, the insider relationship with grandmother tended to further reduce depression. Ruiz and Silverstein (2007) further contend children from single-family homes adjusted well as grandmother became an attachment figure imparting emotional benefits to grandchildren that often endures into adulthood.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This research study employed qualitative methodology. The foundation of this study lies in the data and featured narratives of each participant in their own words.

Sarbin (1986) defines narratives as:

A way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happenings (p. 6).

I report the lived experiences of four African American grandmothers who raised school-aged grandchildren in Dynamic School District using an emerging design which allowed me to hear their voices as they detailed the impact their grandmothering had on their grandchildren's education. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and questions were posed to each participant based on the instrument. This qualitative approach is defined as:

A subjective exploration of an experience from a participant's perspective. The goal of (this) phenomenological inquiry is to fully describe a lived experience. It stresses that only those who have experienced phenomena can communicate them to the outside world, and therefore answers questions of meaning in understanding an experience from those who experience it (Denscombe, 2003; Todres & Holloway, 2004).

This study sought to divulge how these grandmothers interpreted their acts of grandmothering as it related to the academic success of the grandchildren under their care. Although Womanist Thought framed the study, interpretive phenomenological analysis guides the methodological design of this study. The actual words of the participants were offered and analyzed as the central focus of this research in hopes of broadening the scope of experience.

## **Background**

Dynamic School District, located in north Harris County, was considered for this study. It is the 11<sup>th</sup> largest school district in Texas. It encompasses an area of 111 square miles. Enrollment in this school district consists of approximately 70,000 students with a demographic breakdown of 71% Hispanic, 25% African American, 2% White, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. The district is comprised of 85 schools.

The people of this district today represents a diverse population unlike the early settlers of this district. The first settlers in the early 1830s were white farmers who traveled the dirt trails of the area by horse, wagons and buckboards pulled by mules. Most houses during this time were built of wood and consisted of small shacks where sometimes three families lived together (Yockstick, 1985). The fields of this district have been replaced by suburban neighborhoods with large buildings, busy major highways, and symbols of the community including, W.W. Thorne Stadium, George W. Bush International Airport, Greenspoint Mall, and the Houston Police Academy. Homeowners are now also minority business owners and political leaders who are nationally recognized such as the founders of Burns Original Barbeque and the current Mayor of

Houston, Sylvester Turner.

Dynamic School District currently serves nearly 70,000 diverse learners living in portions of Houston and unincorporated areas of Harris County, TX, with a population of approximately 471,000. The current occupational categorization of the district is 59% blue collar workers with the remaining 41% representing white collar workers. The average household income is \$46, 232.

### **Participants**

The participants were a purposeful sampling of African American grandparents who raised grandchildren who graduated high school. Weiss (1994) describes this purposeful sampling as informative experts or privileged witnesses to the phenomenon under study. The power of these participants lie in their information rich narratives with respect to the experience as a primary caregiver of a school-aged grandchild, from whom I can learn the most (Patton, 1990).

This study consisted of four African American grandmothers in Dynamic School District raising academically successful grandsons and/or granddaughters. Each participant was afforded the opportunity to voluntarily agree to participate. To protect their confidentiality, all were assigned an alias.

Two participants were referred for this study by a mutual colleague. One a gatekeeper who provides services to grandmother caregivers and consequently referred other willing participants. In each case, individuals that fit the profile for the study were sought and contacted regarding their willingness and desire to participate. Individuals



who fit the profile were initially contacted via cold call or email.

### **Purposeful Sample**

The participants selected for this study represented a purposeful consideration achieved via interaction rather than a sample of random participants. This purposeful sampling was an endeavor to involve participants who have first-hand experience of the phenomena under consideration. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) contend the research approach selected for this study is best optimized by utilizing homogenous small sample sizes to unearth rich themes that emerge when a specified group of individuals have shared life experiences.

For the sake of this study, successful grandmothering is described as having raised a granddaughter or grandson for the majority of their life who graduated from high school. This study sought to reveal how students raised by grandmothers without their biological parent experienced academic success. The criteria for selecting participants was as follows:

- African American biological grandmother
- Primary caregiver for a granddaughter or grandson for the majority of the grandchild's life
- Grandchild graduated from high school Resides in one urban environment
- At least one of the biological parents sporadically interacts with the grandchild while under grandmother's care

### **Positionality**

This qualitative study relied greatly on me, the researcher as the primary

instrument. An in-depth study of a small group of participants was used to guide and support the formation of postulations. The results of this study, conducted in face-to-face interviews, are descriptive. The goal is to comprehend multiple truths by immersing self in the lives and lived experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009). The participants have unique claims to knowledge that are essential to help the researcher understand the study at hand, thus empowering the participants. Although I am the primary instrument in this study, the interviews serve as the foundation of inquiry to hear the voices and perceptions of grandmothers as they reflected on their acts of grandmothering and the academic success of their grandchildren. As the instrument of data collection, I conducted interviews using prepared questions, audiotaped the interviews, took field notes, and conducted analysis of the data.

Positionality as described by Milner (2007) is a concept where the researcher is knowledgeable of self, knowledgeable of self in relation to others, and knowledgeable of self in relation to the system. These positionalities were significant regarding the topic of what it means to be an African American grandmother raising grandchildren.

Positionality was considered from multiple perspectives: myself as the researcher, the African American grandmothers individually, the African American grandmothers in relation to one another, and the African American grandmothers in relation to me, the researcher. This concept allowed me to consider, identify, and acknowledge potential assumptions and vulnerabilities realized, hidden, and unexpected. “In the process of conducting research, dangers can emerge when and if the researchers do not engage in processes that can circumvent misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentations

of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems” (Milner, 2007, p. 388).

During the semi-structured interviews, I asked open ended questions to provide an opportunity to extend the dialogue beyond the initial question in an effort to create conversation that permitted further inquiry through an extension of questions naturally during the conversation. Three central foci were used during the interview which consisted of personal attributes of the participants; acts related to successfully grandmothering; and their perceived impact on the academic performance of their grandchildren.

Each interview was conducted to seek an in-depth understanding of participant self-perceptions regarding their effectiveness parenting grandchildren. The interviews were all conducted in a face-to-face settings free from distractions, which allowed the conversations to naturally flow. The option was left available for any follow-up interview for clarification purposes. After each recorded interview was completed, I gathered any notes taken during the interview to peruse for details not noted during the live conversation.

I am an African American female who shares some knowledge of the experience as my mother was the primary caregiver to three of her grandchildren, two for the majority of their lives. As researcher, I am an insider as described by Chavez (2008), as someone who shares intimate knowledge or profound experiences of the community of study, as opposed to a partial insider who shares a single identity with some degree of distance or detachment from the community of study. My positionality as insider/outsider shifted as each conversation unfolded. This is a natural dynamic when

navigating through the experiences of participants. “[I]nsiderness or outsidersness are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable in social locations...” (Naples, 1996, p. 140).

As an aunt of a niece and two nephews raised by my mother from a very early age, I am aware of the challenges and rewards of this unique relationship. As an educational leader I am aware of the myriad issues confronting school personnel who educate grandchildren and support their grandmothers raising them. I evaluated the data as presented and suspended my preconceived ideas.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection in qualitative research is complex. The employment of a qualitative approach yields the most accurate data, allowing the experience to be understood. For this study, field notes and audio-recordings were the conduits to obtain data.

The technique of snowballing allowed me to obtain an adequate sample size. Simon and Goes (2013) deemed snowball sampling as the process of asking participants to nominate other potential participants who share similar traits as the grandmothers selected. This process was followed until a sufficient number of participants were gathered.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted audio-recordings may pose logistical issues as some participants may be reluctant to speak without hesitation when audio-recordings are utilized. However, audio-recording is a means of guaranteeing an accurate representation of the participants’ voice and ensuring dependability and confirmability. Furthermore,

this approach afforded me the flexibility to return to the data to achieve an interpretation of meaning. Field notes are deemed less threatening and are not subject to technical difficulties. When utilizing field notes, attentiveness during the interview was necessary in documenting the response of the participants and their own thoughts.

Data collected for this study were conducted through face to face interviews whereby open-ended questions were asked of the participants to facilitate the researcher and participant engaging in dialogue. Participants were allowed to speak about their concerns and tell their stories, feelings, and reflections. Semi-structured interviews of an informal nature, lasting no more than 1.5 hours, were utilized for this study. With the permission of all participants, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. If needed, follow-up phone interviews were conducted for further clarity of the details and meaning of the data. The participants were permitted to select the date, time, and location of the interview to foster candidness and protect privacy. At the completion of each interview, the process of analyzing the data and observations took place.

I began by utilizing the three generic cycles described by Alase (2017). First, gradually break down responses into “thick descriptions” to become aware of key words or phrases expressed by participants. Second, condense the statements into fewer words to arrive at the core essence of what the participants are actually expressing. This allowed me to extrapolate the true meaning of the lived experience. Alase (2017) contended these two condensed coding methods maintains the accuracy represented in the thoughts and experiences of the participants. The final coding stage was penned as the categorizing stage involving encapsulating the core of the meaning unit of the

participants lived experience in one or two words. This meticulous and methodical process breaks down of the experiences of the participants without diminishing or misrepresenting the central meaning of their responses and lived experiences.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research design to understand how African American grandmothers (re)interpreted (Dillard, 1995) their acts of parenting grandchildren. The intent of the study was to expand the limited research relating to the lived experiences of African American grandmothers whose rich voices can inform others about the central issues of educating students raised in grandmother headed households. This study sought to gain a deeper understanding and construct meaning of the grandmothers' perception of their acts of grandparenting as it related to the academic success of their grandchildren.

The purpose of the research method was a comprehensive look at the characteristics, perceptions of the acts of grandparenting, and approach to academic success of four African American grandmothers residing in one urban school district. Qualitative research methods were emphasized within a naturalistic model with the human as the instrument employing methods that are extensions of normal human behavior such observing, listening, speaking, and reading (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Boyer (2015) this study is transcendental, requiring the researcher to set aside prejudgments as much as possible in an effort to look “freshly” at the phenomenon and be open to its “totality.”

## **Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl, developed phenomenology as a philosophy used for understanding a phenomenon “as experienced from the first person point-of-view” (Smith, 2011). It is used as a method to study the lived experiences from the perspective of the individuals living it. Phenomenology prioritizes the voices of those involved in the experience and the stories they tell about their experiences. Thus, phenomenology serves as a powerful tool “for understanding subjective experiences, gaining insight into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom. Phenomenology allows the participants to speak their truth for themselves as they attach meaning to the experience (Lester, 1999, Clottey, 2012). Phenomenology as it relates to my study of African American grandmothers allowed the actual voices of my grandmother participants to be heard.

Qualitative research grounded in an interpretative phenomenological analysis gives the researcher the best opportunity to be conscious of the deepest deliberations of the lived experiences of the participants. This “participant-oriented” approach allowed the participants to express themselves and their experiences as they deemed appropriate without any fear of bias or accusation. The goal was to tell the true story of the participants so that readers can reflect on the experience in such a way that they can understand what it means to experience the phenomenon, therefore answering questions of meaning and understanding of the experience from those experiencing it (Roberts, 2013; Todres & Holloway, 2004). Smith and Osborn (2003) stated, “This methodology ensures that meaning is not just given to the experience by the participants but that the

researcher seeks to understand what it means for the participants.” This allowed both the participant and me, the researcher, to make sense of the phenomena. Miles and Huberman, (1994) contended:

Qualitative data with their emphasis on people’s ‘lived experiences’, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meaning people place on the events, process, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them (p. 10).

Giorgi (1994) discussed the importance of phenomenological research study in the construction of a wholesome understanding that affords me, the researcher, to make strong and informed determination of the ‘meaning unit’. Such ‘meaning unit’ serves to transform and transfer the participants lived experience into a “sensitive psychological expressions, so that these experiences can be written in a more reflective and descriptive manner” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194).

This research approach specifically allowed for multiple participants who have lived similar experiences to tell their stories in a manner that does not distort any of the rich details. Through a ‘participant-oriented’ approach this interpretative phenomenological analysis aimed to gather meaning and understanding of the experience by examining the meaning those experiencing the phenomenon impress upon it. To make sense of the experience and the underlying dynamics, one must ‘bracket’ themselves away from the experience under investigation. Moustakas described this practice as setting aside biases and preconceptions about the experience one is striving to understand (Moustakas, 1994, p.135; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 35) The bottom line was a



true story of the participants lived experiences so that the reader can reflect upon it in such a way that they can better understand what it is like for someone experiencing the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Data Analysis**

This research study abided by the assumption that features of the social environment surrounding the participants are amassed as interpretations by the individuals and those interpretations are situational in nature. The focus of qualitative research served multiple purposes and applied an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject at hand. Understanding was gained utilizing the intricacies of the participant's situations from their own perspectives, as well as the meaning of the happenings that helped to shape their personal and professional lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Marshall & Rossman (1989) contended there is a significance based on the setting, context, and participant perception as a point of emphasis when constructing a generation of theory. Honoring the meaning, commonalities, and voices of each participant was my principal intent as I conducted interviews.

Data in this study was collected through open-ended inquiry from interviews, observations and field notes. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and further verified for accuracy. The analysis of the data took place upon the completion of each participant interview and conclusions constructed by unitizing and categorizing themes and patterns identified in the experiences.

According to Roberts (2013) the researcher in qualitative methodology is central in the conduction of analysis and attaching meaning to participant experiences. The

duality of interpretative analysis allows the participants to make sense of the world around them as the researcher is making sense of the participants trying to make sense of the world around them. The setting, context, and participant situation of reference were emphasized to allow thematic analysis.

Working within the framework of interpretative analysis, with me as the primary researcher and instrument allowed me to share in the experiences of the participants and interpret and understand the phenomenon. In doing so, I was able to make sense of the data under study. Each statement was treated as having equal worth. I examined the data concerning broad topics for overlapping themes and concepts.

Using literature I felt pertained to the study of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren. I explored the realities of woman of color as a function of Womanist Theory, the historical perspectives of African American grandmothers, and grandmothing practices of successful grandmothers raising grandchildren. My study revealed that being an African American grandmother raising grandchildren was more difficult than that of their White counterparts as they encountered challenges that were unique to their role as a parent to their grandchildren as it related to their background, experiences, and race. This finding is supported by Minkler & Fuller-Thompson, (2005) assertion, according to research conducted by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, that African American children are 4-5 times more likely than non-Hispanic White children to reside at grandmothers house.

### **Complementary Data Gathering Techniques**

To gather additional data, I used complementary data collection systems to

enhance the data for interpretation purposes. These systems included digital audio recordings, field notes, and nonverbal cues. The purpose was to enhance the collection of data for interpretation.

### ***Audio Recordings***

A digital recorder was utilized to record, as permitted by each participant, to capture the interviews. The recorder has a retractable USB drive for easy charge and safe storage of confidential recorded data. I employed transcriptions to review and amend any unclear or erroneous audio.

### ***Field Notes***

During each participant interview, I collected field notes to capture written documentation of observations, dialogue, and experiences shared by participants and how the experience impacted their grandmothering. My limited field notes, served to assist in the event that a follow-up interview was needed. Clarifying questions were asked of participants to ensure I accurately captured nonverbal cues as the conversations unfolded.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) qualitative research must have ‘truth value’ if it is deemed worthwhile. Establishing such trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings, as accepted by the participants of the research. Transferability is the process of showing the findings are applicable in other contexts or situations. Dependability is the process of showing the findings are repeatable and consistent. Confirmability is the means of assuring the accuracy of the data by multiple

sources who can confirm the information as true, and not research bias, motivation, or interest.

As researcher and primary instrument in qualitative design, one must show credibility or correctness of description, conclusion, explanation, and interpretation. Triangulation and other integrity measures are necessary as a means of corroborating findings and ensuring an account of a phenomena is rich and comprehensive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). For this study, an audit trail through the utilization of recorded and transcribed face to face interviews, observations, recorded field notes, and follow-up interviews were used to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The privacy and anonymity of the participants were paramount to maintain the ethical standards of the phenomenon of study. Peer briefing of committee members or peers is another strategy researchers can utilize to make sure bias and personal experiences do not hinder the credibility of the study.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a critical technique for establishing credibility. The technique involves transparency by involving participants in the verification of the data collected through the interviews. Member checking or respondent validation is a process of soliciting feedback about the data collected, and sharing the information with the participants to correct for errors and misunderstandings. This critical credibility strategy is also a way of identifying evidence of researcher biases and revising construction of meaning developed by the researcher (Maxwell, 2013). Each participant was provided a copy of the interview transcripts for

review.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is a credibility construct in which the original researcher argues that the findings will be useful to others who seek to make application elsewhere given similar situations. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “if there is to be transferability, the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator rather than with the person seeking to make the application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do.” (p. 298).

Therefore, the primary researcher may only present a specific situation and its meaning for the participant in the study; the reader may make application of the findings and connect then to situations in which he or she has experienced or have knowledge of. In this study, it was my intent to provide the reader an opportunity to make application of varying facets of my research to their lived experiences.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability or repeatability can be established by employing strategies that allows the evaluation and accuracy of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions as sustained by the data collected. Confirmability was attained via triangulation. As part of the research, a reflexive journal detailing researcher feelings, biases, decisions, and peer briefings was maintained. This audit trail provided transparency throughout the research process from the start to the report of findings. Additionally, all raw data, written field notes, and other documents were maintained and secured and accessible only by the researcher.

## **Summary**

Qualitative inquiry is the methodology selected for this study. This chapter details the overarching framework I used to help me in my investigation of the lived experiences of African American grandmothers and how they interpreted their acts of grandmothering related to the academic success of their grandchildren. Information pertaining to the participants in the study, the selection criteria, and the data collection process was included.

I chose qualitative research methods for my study because of the nature, setting, and aspects of my personal interest. I adhered to specific steps and procedures in order to convey the thoughts of African American grandmothers' perception of their impact on the academic achievement of their grandchildren in their care. I investigated the constructed meaning of the correlation between the lived experiences of the four African American grandmothers and the way they grandmothered by employing an interpretive lens. I endeavored to investigate the lived experiences and narratives of the participants in this story with an emphasis on naturalistic inquiry. It is my belief that others can be informed and guided as a result of the stories and voices of the African American grandmothers included in this study. To provide a clear illustration and meaningful portrayal of the circumstances surrounding issues related to grandmothers raising grandchildren, I organized my study to provide personal information about each participant, a description of the precipitating negative life events causing them to parent again, and their personal educational experience.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

Using a combination of thematic and interpretive data analysis, my findings presents the voices of four African American grandmothers who have raised academically successful grandchildren into adulthood. The actual words of each participant is used to tell their story in an effort to maintain the integrity of the ideas presented and to preserve the essence of the messages provided. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. I have attempted to tell each grandmother's story using data gathered from audio-taped face-to-face interviews. To illustrate the individual messages collected from each participant, the data was organized in the following manner: (a) an introduction providing a description and background of each participant (b) an independent review of responses to each research question provided by each participant, and (c) presentation of categorized themes supported by the data from individual interviews and the overall responses to the research question.

Each participant exemplified a great deal of passion as they spoke of their experiences. I found a common theme among all participants as many of the responses to the questions were repeated by each participant. For example, each participant described a common element as they shared their personal childhood experiences. They were all doing what many in the African American community believe "they are supposed to do." They are doing what they saw their mothers and grandmothers doing in generations of old. As they spoke of these experiences it was easy for me to become ensnared by the

words and non-verbal cues as they told their stories. The actual words of each participant were utilized to render the most accurate depiction of the ideas and thoughts expressed during each interview. The lived experiences as told by each participant were guided by the following overarching research questions:

- 1) How do African American grandmothers describe their personal attributes related to their grandmothering?
- 2) How do African American grandmothers exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering?
- 3) How do African American grandmothers describe their perceptions about grandmothering to support student academic achievement?

Interviews of each participant were guided by open-ended, semi-structured questions (See Appendix A). The individual interviews allowed each participant to tell their stories related to their experience as an African American grandmother in one urban school district in Harris County, Texas.

In this section, I will begin with a profile of each participant. Utilizing thematic analysis, there were four major themes that surfaced from the interview with the grandmothers. The major themes were: (1) strong parental influence; (2) strong spiritual influence; (3) limited interactions with parents; and (4) commitment to grandchildren over all else. Subthemes that also emerged include, (a) do-over; and (b) grandmothering with a biological grandfather versus a non-biological grandfather. The grandmother's responses to the individual interview questions as related to the research were discussed and summarized.



### **Carla the Compassionate Grandmother's Profile**

At 60 years old, the Compassionate grandmother is the youngest of the grandmothers included in this study. She is the mother of three adult children and the grandmother of twelve. After graduating high school, The Compassionate grandmother enlisted in the Army Reserves and attended college for two years. She has raised three grandchildren, one from her daughter and two from her son, and three of her nieces, from her sister. I called her compassionate because she placed great emphasis on always wanting her grandchildren to witness her showing unconditional love and compassion for their parents, despite the negative events they experienced. She became a grandmother for the first time at 30 years old.

I asked the Compassionate grandmother to tell me something about her family. With a huge smile on her face, the Compassionate grandmother detailed a strong special love she shared with her maternal grandparents. She stated, "I would rather stay with them than my parents." Although she talked about her fond memories of love related to her parents, she said, "...but it was a special love I had for my grandparents!" Compassionate recalled, "My grandparents definitely raised me." When discussing family, the Compassionate grandmother never mentioned a spouse.

The Compassionate grandmother believed strongly in education and academics. This was evident in her remembrance of her grandparents, born during slavery, who had a third or fourth grade education. However, they instilled in her and her siblings their desire to have a better life through education. Her maternal grandmother wanted to go to school, but she couldn't. With only a third or fourth grade education, her grandmother

instilled in her the importance of getting a good education. She stated:

It was important that we knew how to read and write and know what was going on in the world. So, my grandparents always told us they wanted us to get a good education because they wanted us to have a better life than they had, but I told them the life they had was pretty good to me.”

The Compassionate grandmother remembered as a child the consequences if she did not go to school, “...you got your butt whipped. For the boys, you had to go to school. If you didn’t go to school you had to work, or Uncle Sam was coming for you.” She graduated high school and enlisted in the Army Reserve shortly afterwards. She also attended college for two years in Pasadena California.

The Compassionate grandmother shared with me that as a small child she remembered her grandparents telling all of their grandchildren if the need ever arose, “raise your own grandchildren, although you might not want to.” She conveyed to me that her grandmother believed that if someone else raised their grandchildren, they would not raise them with the same love and understanding. For that reason, she recalled, “There are a lot of us raising our grandkids in our family.”

### **Carla the Compassionate Grandmother’s Interview**

I was introduced to the Compassionate grandmother by another participant, who is a gatekeeper and organizer of a group of grandmothers raising their grandchildren, of which she is a member. Our first conversation was via a phone call to introduce myself and my research. I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm exemplified by the Compassionate grandmother about being a part of my research study. She shared that she

was excited to tell her story.

After a few phone calls and an email or two, the day finally arrived that I met the Compassionate grandmother face-to-face for our individual interview. Before me appeared a shy-looking, but self-assured grandmother who quickly told me, “I am a hugger,” as she embraced me with a warm hug and a, “nice to meet you.” I think that immediately put us both at ease and made for a great interview.

I began the interview with the question, “Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?” To which Compassionate proudly responded, “Well, I am 60 years old!” The Compassionate grandmother went on to say she was the mother of three adult kids and grandmother of twelve. Compassionate continued by recalling that she had also raised one niece, whom she helped to go to college. She is now raising her niece’s two children, her great-nieces. With a smile and thoughtful look on her face, she began trying to recall when her first grandchild came to live with her. “Oh Lord, I got to go back some years” she told me. After a few seconds, she recalled her oldest grandchild is 27 years old, “So I had to be 30.” She explained the first time she began grandmothering. She explains her daughter and her abusive husband were going through “rough times” in their marriage and her grandson came to live with her “on and off” at the age of five. The marriage eventually ended in divorce. After some time he went back to stay with his mom before he returned to live with her again at age 12 and stayed until her graduated high school. She then began raising another set of grandchildren who came to live with her in 2008, at the ages of two and seven. Drug abuse by her son and the mother of the children was one precipitating factor in their new living arrangement and they are currently still under her

care and custody.

When asked to describe her personal attributes related to grandmothering, it was obvious to see that the Compassionate grandmother had strong family ties as she talked about her strong religious family that believed in caring for their own. She described, “We are a village. We try to take care of each and every family member the best we can, if you are on drugs or whatever. So some of us will pitch in and some of us won’t.”

This life experience was important in fostering other personal values she described related to grandmothering her grandchildren. “We were raised to always help one another,” she stated. As a testament to her belief in taking care of family, the Compassionate grandmother goes on to tell me about her two grandchildren born to her oldest son, who also came to live with her in 2008 after both parents became involved in drugs and were unable to care for them. Another testament to her strong family ties and act of grandmothering was when her oldest sister’s job required her to travel often, the Compassionate grandmother then began raising her sister’s daughter and she remained in her care through high school. She also assisted her niece by caring for her two children as she attended college and received her Master’s degree. She raised her two great-nieces from birth as their mother attended college until March 2017 when their mother married. She stated her niece is now “doing good” and is continuing her education. She showed obvious pride in the part she played in her success.

I asked the Compassionate grandmother to describe her personal qualities, values, or behaviors related to her grandmothering her grandchildren. She gave me a pensive look, spoke in a soft tone, and stated, “You got to put faith in them. They need faith.

They need understanding.” She went on to say grandmothers have to have wisdom and love because many of them [children raised by grandmothers] have not been shown love. Without prompting, she went on to explain “the new generation” of parents don’t always have time for their children because they live “fast paced” lives and they are always on the move. “They think about themselves instead of their kids.” For that reason, she said grandmothers raising grandchildren must have that special love for their grandchildren and spend quality time with them. After a moment, she continued:

This is how I felt. When I got the other two [the grandchildren born to her oldest son], they did not understand why this was happening to them. They didn’t know why they wasn’t loved enough for their parents to keep them. They couldn’t understand what was going on. They just knew they were one place one day and another place another day, then they came to me. So they didn’t understand what was going on. So in a way they figured nobody wanted them. So you have to get that [feeling] out of them. Because a lot of times when children grow up like that, and they get old enough, they feel nobody wants them, so they don’t want to be anything because they figure nobody cares for them. I showed them that love comes in all kinds of ways.

She recalled her granddaughter, who is 15 years old now, still struggles with feeling like she is not loved. Since coming to live with her at the age of seven, she still feels that her granddaughter is thriving for that love from her parents. She said, she has to be patient with her and continue to show her unconditional love.

I asked the Compassionate grandmother what interpersonal dynamics impacted

her effectiveness as a grandmother raising grandchildren. Referring back to her values as a grandmother, she stated it was important to attend church with her grandchildren to instill compassion, religious principals, and to help them grow in faith in themselves and God. “A lot of people do not want to put them in church, but you need to put them in church.” She also said it is important to always remember God is in control and not man. “When we go to church, we put them [their parents] on the prayer list. Every night we pray for their parents. I don’t say nothing harsh about their parents in front of them. I tell them their parents need help.” Her compassion for others was evident in her testament that she always endeavored to present kindness as she related to her children so her grandchildren can grow up with memories of her talking about their parents in a loving and caring way, despite their place in life. She told me she wanted them to see her showing their parents compassion and love.

In response to how she exercised and interpreted her acts of grandmothering, the Compassionate grandmother described the role her upbringing played in how she parented her grandchildren, nieces, and great nieces. She stated she tried to treat them the same way her grandparents and parents treated she and her siblings. She recalled “the old fashion way” her parents taught them. She explained, “When my parents hit the floor, we had to hit the floor.” She said that meant that if it was five o’clock in the morning, you got up at five o’clock in the morning also. Chores were also an important part of her childhood. She talked about going to the chicken coop to gather eggs early in the morning before school and hanging clothes “on the line” to dry after they were washed. The Compassionate grandmother equated doing chores as a way to show her parents and

grandparents appreciation “for what they had done for us.” So, her grandchild have chores and she keeps a chore chart. “Everybody has chores.” Routines are also important as she raises her grandchildren. As a result, Monday through Sunday there are expectations and responsibilities that must be done, just as it was for her as a child. I asked the Compassionate grandmother what did having chores teach her and what did she hope it taught her grandchildren. She stated it taught her to show respect and to be responsible. She said, “My grandparents, you know, they taught us how to be independent, very independent.”

I asked the Compassionate grandmother what values, goals, interests, or beliefs influenced the way she raised her grandchildren. She stated she wants to teach her grandchildren to work for what they want in life. “They are not a handout.” She continued by adding:

When we was coming up, when I was small, we noticed our grandparents couldn’t read as well as we could. And then one day my grandmother sat us down and told us, ‘I may not can read as good as you, I may not can add as good as you, but I have the wisdom to teach you more than just reading and adding. I have life experiences that you need in life.’ So, she always told us stories of what happened to her when she was a child. What she had to go through. She always told us to remember her stories because one day we might have to raise our grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Many in my family are raising their grandchildren. We teach them about faith, trust, love, and forgiveness. We always love one another, no matter what we go through, we always love one

another. That is what my grandma taught us.

When asked to share an important experience that facilitated her becoming a parent to her grandchildren, the Compassionate grandmother began to describe when she made the decision to take care of her son's children, which signified to me her selfless nature and her commitment to the values instilled in her as a child. She said:

It was around Memorial Day in 2007 and my son kept calling me and I didn't answer the phone because I was packing getting my stuff together. Something told me he has been calling too much, something must have happened. I decided I better call him back. Something might be wrong with the kids. So I called him back and he said, 'Mom, I need you. I need you to come down here to CPS [Child Protective Services]...to get the kids.' I went there only to talk to the people and they asked me fifty million questions. Their mother had failed a drug test and when they asked him [her son] if he was on drugs, he told them no. I looked at him and I did not say anything. I knew they would find out when they gave him a drug test. So when the test came back [positive] they told him he could not have the kids. They had asked about her mother taking the kids. When she gave them her mother's name and everything and they looked up her mother's name, she could not get them because she was an ex-con(vict). Her father could not get them because he was also an ex-con(vict). She told the worker she did not want me to have them. I was told that if I wanted to take the kids I could come to get them in three days. I told her [the CPS worker] to let me pray about it and if it is the right decision I'll take them. I knew I would have problems with the mother.



I told her I would call her in three days. Before I got to my car, I called the worker back and told her I would take the kids. She told me that was fast, and I told her God already knew what I was going to do.

The Compassionate grandmother further described how she exercised her acts of grandmothering by putting the needs of the children above all else. For that reason, she made the decision to limit the interactions her grandchildren had with their parents. She described this act as “the hardest one for me and for them.” The Compassionate grandmother says it was important for the parents to stay away from the children because it caused problems when she tried to enforce her rules with interference from their parents. She stated she could not be their parent and their friend if they were going to respect her and comply with the rules. She recalled the children being confused when her rules differed from what the parents would tell them. She instilled in her grandchildren they had to follow her rules because she was the one caring for them, sitting with them at night when they were sick, clothing and feeding them. She also had to convey to the parents they could not be a “sometimes parent” to the children.

Another act of grandmothering the Compassionate grandparent discussed as important was she never confronted the parents in the presence of the children. She explained:

If you say something to them, to the parents, in front of the kids, the kids would think you don’t want the parents there. So you know, that makes the child more confused about whether they should do, what you say, or what the parent say. So this is what I do...well this is what I did... when the kids decide to go upstairs or

outside, I talked to the parents. I tell them these were the rules in this house while you are here and I tell them I would like for it to stay like that. That street stuff, don't bring it into my house because I don't teach them that. Don't bring that here. If you can't come to my house and follow the rules that you were raised with, don't come here. That street stuff is not getting you anywhere, why would you want to bring that to your kids. Kids now pick up stuff really fast and the next thing you know the child is on the streets.

The Compassionate grandmother described her role as a parent and a grandparent as the same. "I am the only parent they really know because their real parents are out of the picture." She talked about her role to teach them the value of life, how to take care of themselves, and how to respect others. Respect came up several times during our interview. "I tell them to respect their elders. You respect people if you want them to respect you." As she referred back to her own childhood, she said she wanted them to treat others the way they wanted to be treated. She recalled telling her grandchildren not to "cuss" or use profanity if they don't want to be treated that way.

I asked the Compassionate grandmother what techniques or approaches did she use to gain insight into what her grandchildren needed from her. She quickly responded:

I can look at them and see what they need. They don't have nobody to hug them, to show them love, to talk to them instead of talking at them. I talk to them. If you talk to a child, the child responds better. If you holler at them, they don't understand. There is a difference. A lot of people don't understand that.

Her compassionate nature is evident as she continued by talking about the importance of

looking eye to eye when she is talking to her grandchildren.

I asked the Compassionate Grandmother to describe an obstacle or restriction that caused her the most concern while grandmothering. She smiled at me and told me she recently had a conversation with a family member who was also grandmothering her children and they both shared the same concern. “You know I hate to say it, but this is always in the back of my mind...it is something that we are all scared of because our...most of our grandkids are kids of parents who are on drugs.” She spoke with concern and compassion about her fear that her grandchildren might be easily influenced to do drugs. She stated she was told by the children’s doctor because they were born with drugs in their systems, it could impact them and she fears they might easily turn to drugs. For that reason, she talks to them often about their friends and the people they hang around. “We can’t watch them 24/7 so we have to pray. I tell them they don’t have friends, but associates. I tell them friends would not influence you do to this or that.”

I asked the Compassionate grandmother how her decision to parent her grandchildren impacted her personal and professional life. She did not talk about the struggles of grandmothering, but rather how it changed her for the better. She replied:

It changed completely. Now it seems like I have more to live for, to make sure they have a better life. I was not working at the time. I was getting ready to go on vacation. Me and my cousin had plans. I was getting ready to go to Louisiana, from Louisiana I was going to Florida, from Florida I was going to New York. You know, what I say is Lord help me to stay here for another 20 years and I can travel after they all finish high school. I will travel when they are in college. I

have to make sure they are alright first before I go anywhere else. So it really did not change anything for me, it just made it better.

This comment further signified to me her compassionate nature, selfless attitude, and commitment to her grandchildren's wellbeing over all else.

When asked to describe perceptions related to the academic achievement of her grandchildren, she began to talk about high expectations and responsibilities, which were the values that were instilled in her as a child. When she described how she established a positive learning environment at home to support education, I could see the seriousness in her eyes as she spoke. After a few statements regarding her beliefs about technology and how it can negatively influence children today, she talked about another organized routine at her home. "Three days a week we do reading and writing, one day is for math, and then homework." She expressed that high expectations and no excuses were the norm for her grandchildren. "I don't accept Cs and Ds on report cards because if there is something they don't know, there is someone in the family that will teach you what you need to learn." Technology was limited as she talked about the importance of using their minds. Although computers are in the home, their primary purpose was for learning.

The Compassionate grandmother stayed involved in her grandchildren's educational progress. She called the school to check on homework and assignments. "If they don't have homework, I give them homework...their mind is always on homework... we don't have time to play...you play on the weekend. Monday through Friday, we are doing something. You are picking up a book or doing something." She said her goal was to teach them that education is an important aspect of life. "To get a

good job you have to have an education. I tell them it is more than just a high school diploma. I say you got to have something behind your name if you want something in life.” When I asked her what she meant by “have something behind your name,” she responded she wants her grandchildren to have academic credentials that will help them make a good life for themselves and their families.

I asked her to describe a difficult decision she made while grandmothering that impacted her grandchildren academically. The Compassionate grandmother recalled a time when one of her grandsons was 10 years old. He had been enrolled in school since the age of two. She noticed he could not talk and he went to a “special school” to teach him to talk. “He went to head-start.” Following head-start, she enrolled him in college-preparatory school which served under-resourced communities. She remembered him attending through the fourth grade and being an honor-roll student. After fourth grade, he wanted to go back to the public school setting at the school to which he was zoned.

This recollection brought out the Compassionate grandmother’s passion as she changed her thought and stated, “That’s why I am always talking to parents about talking and listening to a child.” She then went back to her recollection of the conversation about where he wanted to go to school. She said she agreed to allow him to return to Dynamic School District for one year and if he did not like it she would enroll him back in the college-preparatory academy. She stated, “Because this is his education.” This indicated to me she was showing him she valued his opinion and trusted him. He did not return to the college-preparatory academy, but rather continued to make outstanding academic progress in his current setting. While in middle school, he met a young man

who was attending the Early College High School program offered by the Dynamic School District that afforded students the opportunity to receive scholarships to attend high school and a local community college simultaneously and graduate with both a high school diploma and an Associate's Degree. Her grandson wants to be an engineer, and this decision gave him an opportunity he would not have had if he continued at the college-preparatory academy. He is currently on track for two graduations at the same time.

I asked the Compassionate Grandmother what key factors of her grandmothering contributed to her grandchildren successfully graduating high school. She said in her grandmotherly voice, "Because I stayed on their behinds about school. I never left off." When I asked her what she meant by her statement, she went on to say:

I stayed on them about education. I even went to school to check on their grades. I had to make sure they were doing right in school. I did not send them to school to be a class clown. I told them no one will have time for you if you want to be the class clown. I did not just take their word for it, I would go to the school and see what was going on. Because I told them none of my grandkids are going to be standing on a corner until they are 50 years old and time passes them by and they have nothing to show for their life.

The interview was concluded with my final question of the Compassionate grandmother. Is there anything that I did not ask or that you did not mention that you would like to add about yourself, your experiences, about being an African American grandmother raising grandchildren, and or about the education of African American

grandchildren raised by grandmothers? To which she responded confidently, yet compassionately:

We don't get the credit that we deserve. That's the problem. We don't get...we don't get the credit we deserve raising our grandchildren, raising kids period. African Americans don't get great credit from society, period. Because you know, what society sees in us is our children in jail or selling drugs. That's what they see about our children. They don't see our children as doctors and lawyers and stuff like that...That's sad, that's real sad.

The Compassionate grandmother stated many African American children, especially those raised by grandmothers, often give up on school and life because of the constant negative depictions portrayed in mass media. Eventually the depictions become a self-fulfilling prophecy for many African American children. She hopes her constant positive encouragement will cancel out the voices of doubt and despair for others.

### **Stella the Steadfast Grandmother's Profile**

The Steadfast grandmother and her sister were raised in Midway, TX, a small town approximately 27 miles from Huntsville, by her mother and step-father, following her father's death from leukemia when she was a small infant. She recalled moving to Houston when she was a year old. Sitting before me was a tall, statuesque and vibrant grandmother, who looked decades younger than her chronological age of 80. She chuckled often as she told of her experiences. She spoke of her very close knit family and chuckled, "I guess most of us are close." She proceeded to state there are always family members that don't "stick as close as you'd like them to." But she recalled the nucleus of

her family is very close knit and often enjoy getting together and spending time together.

“We are a good family, I think.”

She is a retired educator, who served as a school counselor and administrator prior to her retirement. The Steadfast grandmother did not immediately talk about her own children, when I asked her to tell me about her family. However, as the interview progressed, she talked of being the mother of four children, one daughter and three sons. She raised her first granddaughter, her only daughter's child. I ascertained her steadfastness when she expressed how she had to stand her ground with her daughter when she did not agree with her decision to raise her granddaughter. She stated she had a “late baby” who was raised alongside her granddaughter. There was only a ten year difference in their age. She spoke fondly of her deceased husband who was also an educator who served as a school administrator as well, both working in Dynamic School District their entire careers.

I asked the Steadfast grandmother to describe her personal educational experience and she fondly took me back to kindergarten. She said that was “a very strong time way back then”, a time she will never forget. She spoke of a very stormy night, the evening before her first day of kindergarten and she recalled her uncle, her mother's brother was there. She told of her experience on the first day of kindergarten when she recalled being taken to the principal's office and asked to spell the words mother, father, brother, and sister. She stated after spelling the words correctly, she was immediately moved from kindergarten to second grade. Her experience entailed her always being the youngest in her class, however, she said, “I managed to stay at the top of the class all the way through



school, and I'm proud of that."

It was obvious that education was important to the Steadfast grandmother as the interview progressed. As a young married mother with three children and a grandchild at that time, the Steadfast grandmother recalled she went on to receive her Bachelor's degree by taking classes on the weekend as she worked as a manager at a fast food restaurant during the week. She later went on to receive her Master's degree while working fulltime as a teacher. These actions further confirmed her steadfast nature. Her personal educational pursuit served as an example of academic excellence for her children and grandchildren.

### **Stella the Steadfast Grandmother's Interview**

I have known the Steadfast grandmother all of my life as we are related through marriage. Interviewing the Steadfast grandmother gave me additional insight as an outsider related to her experience as her grandmother raising her grandchild. When I first decided on my research topic, the Steadfast grandmother did not immediately come to mind as a potential participant, because unconsciously I did not think of her as a grandmother raising a grandchild. I guess because her grandchild and I grew up together and I remembered the Steadfast grandmother interacted as her mother, not her grandmother. The day it dawned on me that she would be a potential participant, I guess it dawned on her as well. I called her to ask her if she would be interested in being a part of my research study, and she responded, "But I have not raised grandchildren." I had to remind her that she raised her granddaughter and I called her by name. She chuckled and said to me, "Oh yeah, she is my grandchild." We both had a good laugh that day. That

spoke to the blurred lines between mothering and grandmothering for the Steadfast grandmother.

The day I met with the Steadfast grandmother to conduct the interview, she chuckled and reminded me of the fact that she did not consider herself a grandmother raising a grandchild. After another laugh about the matter, the interview proceeded. She recalled the day her teen daughter brought her first grandchild, a girl, home from the hospital. Her granddaughter continued to live with her and her husband through high school, college, and after college until she married and moved into a house directly next door. This was an indication of the close knit family the Steadfast grandmother referenced early in the interview.

When asked, “Can you tell me something about Stella?” The Steadfast grandmother responded, “I am a grandmother and a great-grand mother. She is actually my first grandchild and I am a retired school personnel.” She continued and described how she worked as a second grade teacher prior to retiring as an assistant principal in a high school. During her career in education, she also worked as a special education counselor, serving students from PreK to high school. She is a very active member in her church. She further said, “I had a very strong family foundation in religion and I think that has been the rock for me and what has made me the person that I am.”

When asked her age when her granddaughter came to live with her, the Steadfast grandmother described herself at the time her granddaughter was born and came to live with her immediately after birth as, “I was too young to have a grandchild because I was too young to have a child, her mother...I was 34 when she was born and she came to live

with us because my daughter, her mother was still living with us. And so she came home with us and remained with us until she moved out before marriage.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother to describe some significant personal qualities, values, and behaviors related grandmothering. The first quality she described was the ability to be firm when making decisions vital to the growth and success of your grandchild. She went on to say, “I think it is important to stand by your decisions.” She informed me that even though her daughter did not want to leave the child when she moved out, she stood firm and did not allow her to take the child. She stated, “Well, at that time, I didn’t care. I just made up my mind that this is what was going to happen, and that is what happened.”

Another characteristic she described as important relating to the act of grandmothering was to show love and understanding. “You have to stay steadfast in what you believe is right and necessary for them to be successful and for them to be happy. I felt like I tried to give her what I felt like she needed. I tried to give her things she wanted.”

When asked what interpersonal dynamics impacted her effectiveness as a grandmother parenting, the Steadfast grandmother stated the need to provide a spiritual environment like the one she was raised in as a child. She stated it was paramount to her effectively grandmothering her granddaughter. She began to describe her upbringing and went on to say:

I guess having been raised in the church as a youngster, I felt like my mom and dad carried me to church more than I want to be. Sundays were fun times for my

friends, but it was church time for me. They [friends] all got together and hung out and they went to the movies and they did all this and I was in [church] service Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and in the middle of the day if there was a service. But when I got married, I decided that I was never going to church other than Sunday morning. And that lasted a couple of weeks and I couldn't stand it. And so it was...it [church attendance] has been so ingrained in me until I felt that this was just part of me. I had to worship God to be successful and to live the way I felt God wanted me to live. And so I wanted this child brought up the same way.

I asked the Steadfast grandmother what she meant when she said, "I wanted this child brought up the same way." To the question she replied, "Brought up realizing the importance of God and the importance of doing what God wants you to do."

When asked what interests, goals, and beliefs influenced her parenting her grandchild, the Steadfast grandmother paused for a brief moment and stated, "We were strong academic people. My husband and I both were teachers and we felt like she needed to have a strong background, educational background as well as a spiritual background." She told me school has always been important and she encouraged her grandchild in school. She recalled her granddaughter struggling during high school and she worked really hard to be successful. She said when her granddaughter enrolled in college, she started out in community college and later transferred to a local University. The Steadfast grandmother stated, "That was fine with me as long as she was going to school." Her granddaughter followed in her footsteps and is currently a teacher in the

urban school district she attended as a student. The Steadfast grandmother enthusiastically stated:

So, education and spirituality has been very strong in all of our lives. I feel like we planted the seeds so to speak, so that she could be successful and she could be academically strong. And I guess I see it passing on down to my great-granddaughter. At the age of six, she is very academically strong and it just amazes me what she does.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother what life experiences facilitated her decision to parent her granddaughter. Her thoughts went back to her childhood and thoughts of her own mother. “My mom was always very strong in doing the right thing. That made me feel that I too had to be very strong in doing the right thing.” When her daughter made the decision to move out with a young baby, she stated she did not think it was the right thing to do. “I just did not feel comfortable with the crowd she was associating herself with and it was not the environment that I wanted the baby to be in. So, I put my foot down.” I asked the Steadfast grandmother what made her uncomfortable with her granddaughter living with her mother. She replied, “Well, I was not sure at the time, but I felt strongly that my daughter was dabbling in drugs.” The Steadfast grandmother told me she informed her daughter she was free to leave, but she could not take the baby with her. She stated years later she found out her daughter resented her for not allowing her to take the baby with her. Confident in her decision to stand firm, Steadfast stated, “However, I felt that I needed to keep this child in an environment that would, you know, be conducive to good living, right living, and spiritual living, whatever. And I just did

not see that happening with her moving in with her mom.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother to tell me a little more about finding out her daughter resented her for not allowing her to take the child. She said, “Her mother, she felt like I took her from her, and maybe I did. I didn’t see it that way at the time. I just felt like I was looking out for the child.” A safe environment for her grandchild was described by the Steadfast grandmother as one of the important factors in her decision to parent again. Her concerns for her granddaughter’s safety took precedence over her relationship with her daughter. She also told me she had a son who was jealous of the treatment her granddaughter received because she was not his mother’s “child” but the grandchild. To that the Steadfast grandmother said, “I thought, well, you know, she deserves whatever ya’ll have and she gets what you get. So that’s the way it is.”

Another life experience Steadfast discussed related to facilitating her act of grandmothering is what she described as a “do over.” Reflecting on her mothering her own children she stated, “I could do over,” referring to reliving motherhood through her granddaughter. She said, “I gave her things my kids did not have because I was a young mother.” The Steadfast grandmother talked about a time when she decorated her granddaughter’s room with a canopy bed she really wanted. “That was a time for me to redo things I had not done with her mom.” She proudly told me that her granddaughter has always been very self-assured and knows what she wants. With a chuckle and a big smile on her face, the Steadfast grandmother stated, “I feel like I have a little part in that and that makes me happy.”

When asked to describe her role as grandmother and parent to her grandchild,

Steadfast did not think there was a difference. “I see them as the same role.” She went on to say she did not know how to differentiate between the two. I was her parent. Well, I guess I knew I was her grandmother, but I needed to do the things that a mother would do and so that’s what I did. And so I have a difficult time putting a line through that.” I then asked the Steadfast grandmother how did parenting her children differ from parenting her grandchild. To that she said, “Because she was raised along with my children, I had a late baby that was only ten years younger than her, it wasn’t any difference as far as I was concerned because they were all children in the house.”

The Steadfast grandmother talked of how she gained insight into what her granddaughter needed by “just being observant.” She spoke about listening to what her granddaughter said about things and “tucking it away in my mind.” She would then decide if that was something she needed to pay attention to or revisit at a later time. She explained that she would “listen to the questions” being asked and answer those questions. “I was taught that’s the way you learn by asking questions. So I would try my best to answer.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother to tell me about any obstacle or restriction that caused her concern as she carried out her role as a grandmother parenting her grandchild. It took her a moment to think and she paused and said, “Ok, I’m trying to think.” After a brief pause, she recalled, “The only obstacle or thing that really came into play was the fact that her mother did not want her to...did not want to leave her.” I asked to Steadfast grandmother to talk about that obstacle. She said, “Well at the time, I didn’t care. I just made up my mind that this is what was going to happen. My husband agreed with me

and that was what happened. And like I say, I didn't find out until years later that my daughter actually felt like that I had taken her from her because she never expressed that. And so, I don't know. It just...it did not bother me." I asked her did she feel her grandmothering suffered any negative impact by the fact that her daughter did not want to leave the child. The Steadfast grandmother confidently said, "No. I was just...I knew what needed to be done and I did my best to do it."

I asked the Steadfast grandmother how her decision to grandmother impacted her personal and professional life. Her response was, "I had to make arrangements for her to get to school. When she was in kindergarten, I also had a foster child that was three years old. So I was able to take the two of them to school with me because I taught elementary school at the time. I was not a real concern that hindered me, it was just part of the game. I would go to her school when she needed something and I just made sure she had what she needed and wanted at school."

She chuckled and told me when her granddaughter was in high school, her husband was one of the assistant principals at the school. She began to laugh and recalled that when her granddaughter would overspend her allowance, she would wait until she could find her grandfather talking to one of his co-workers and she would go up to him and inform him that she needed money for lunch. She laughed as she said, "He would always caution her this is all the money you get for the week. It was enough for lunch for the entire week. He would tell her not to ask for more. Despite his admonition, she would give her the extra money and come home and tell her not to ask for any more money, and she would do it to him over and over again." She recalled, "She had him



wrapped around her finger.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother how she went about establishing a positive learning environment to support her grandchild’s education. She quickly said she always followed up on her homework. It was important that her grandchild followed through with her homework and she understood it. “As an elementary teacher at the time, I was able to convey a lot of things that she possibly might have missed.” The Steadfast grandmother said as she noticed gaps in learning for her own students, she would come home and make sure her granddaughter did not have those same gaps. She said her experience as a teacher helped her make sure she filled in any gaps in learning. She recalled:

I remember we did not have a dishwasher at the time. I will never forget on a page of her homework there was a picture of a dishwasher and she called it a washing machine because she did not know. So I took the time to make sure she knew what things were and how they operated as she came in contact with them.”

Our interview went back to the time when her granddaughter struggled in high school. I asked the Steadfast grandmother how she helped her granddaughter. “I talked to coworkers because by this time, I was also working on a high school level and I got suggestions and such like. And I then also made arrangements for her to take classes at another high school after school to try and support and strengthen the weak areas. I think that was successful. I was never strong in math myself, I was more of an English major.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother how did she go about finding out what her granddaughter needed to successfully graduate from high school. She says, “Well you

know you get the report card from school and when you see there is a need you try and find out what kind of help you can get for that. That is what I meant when I said I asked my coworkers about courses and putting her in the other school for strengthening and reinforcement.”

In describing her role in her grandchild’s education, the Steadfast grandmother said it was her responsibility to make sure she had strong teachers. “I tried to make sure she did whatever assignments were given to her and making sure she attended school all the time. She never had a problem with absenteeism and I never heard of her skipping school. She didn’t get into trouble at school. I guess I was trying to be a positive role model for her. The fact that I was in the school system and knew what to look for...I tried to make sure that she was doing the right thing.” She went on to say that setting high expectations for her grandchild and making sure her grandchild knew what she expected was a key factor in her success in school. She recalled, “Because as educators, that was just a natural step to follow and so I think our example and our expectations were the key factors.”

I asked the Steadfast grandmother to discuss a difficult decision she had to make that impacted her grandchild’s education, and she struggled to come up with a difficult decision she had to make. She says, “I am having trouble with that. I can’t think of anything because like I said I’ve tried to make sure that she was in school and she graduated and she got what she needed.” After a moment of pondering, she said:

She started out in the band and I wanted her to continue in the band. When she got into middle school, she didn’t want to do it anymore and I was disappointed in

that. I guess because her mother had been in the band all the way through high school. I kind of wanted her to follow in that path. When she got to middle school, she decided that she didn't want to be in the band anymore. So I didn't pressure her, but it was hard for me to make the decision to allow her to withdraw from it."

I asked her if she thought that decision had any impact on her education and the Steadfast grandmother said, "No, apparently not because it doesn't seem like she ever missed it."

I ended the interview by asking the Steadfast grandmother if there was anything I did not ask, did not mention, or that she would like to add about her experience as an African American grandmother raising a grandchild or about educating an African American grandchild raised by a grandmother? She gave thought and paused before she responds and said:

I guess I see such a difference now that it kind of alarms me. I see grandparents now having to raise their grandchildren and seeming not to care. And maybe that may be the wrong interpretation. But it appears that they are just abiding...that they are abiding the time... just trying to be there until little kids get going and get out. I don't see a lot of them taking the extra steps. I guess because of that I often look back and say, you know as a grandmother I tried to do this and I tried to do that. As a grandmother now with grandkids from my child I had late in life, I have been carpooling, not carpooling but driving them. I take the little one to school and I pick him up. And then with my great-granddaughter of that same grandchild I raised, I've carried her to school and picked her up and just do things

parents do. I am visualizing this one other grandmother I see bringing her grandchild to school...she's in the same dance group as my great-granddaughter and we meet up in the mornings trying to get these kids there on time. But I don't see that a lot. I see a lot of grandparents that seem to be very harsh with their (grand) kids. I see these kids are not to blame for their situation. It's unfortunate that they have to be treated like they are a nuisance as opposed to nurturing them and letting them know that they are loved and they are wanted. I guess that's one of the things that I look at and I'm not in the school system anymore on a regular basis, but coming and going, I've come across that and I see that a lot. It's like...you know... whatever. They take the attitude of whatever and these poor kids are suffering.

After her comment, I asked the Steadfast grandmother if she had any personal assumptions or ideas about what she deemed a prevalent attitude among grandmothers of the current generation of grandchildren. To which she responds:

Before I retired seeing grandparents coming to school on their grandchildren behalf and listening to my grandchild that I raised talk about the grandparents of the kindergarten students she teaches... I see it in a different light. I see people with their grandkids at church and some of them having to be parents. I don't know...I just kind of observe and look at how they handle their (grand) kids and how they think. I have tried to always be patient and me having a child late in life, 22 years after my other child. He use to always have questions, questions, questions and I always tried to answer those questions because I was taught that

the way you learn by asking questions. I've seen grandparents say 'listen, go sit down somewhere.' That kind of bothers me because it was something that maybe was on that child's mind. And just a simple...maybe we will talk about that later or maybe we need to look that up or something like that would have been a better way of handling it I think as opposed to just dismissing the child.

The Steadfast grandmother's final statement reiterated her belief that listening to her granddaughter was an important aspect of her grandmothering. An attitude she thinks is missing in the lives of some grandmothers raised by grandchildren.

### **Anna the Activist Grandmother Profile**

The Activist grandmother is a petite woman who too looks much younger than her chronological age. She exudes respect in the confident manner in which she enters the room and her articulate vernacular. It is obvious that she is passionate about grandmothers raising grandchildren and providing access to resources to this population of parents she deemed "underserved and underrepresented" across the country.

The Activist grandmother shared that education was very important throughout her childhood as her brother graduated from a private boarding school in New York and she attended an all-girls school before attending college in New York. A passion for activism was sparked in high school during the civil rights movement and has continued throughout her life. She said she began volunteering in the community at 15 years old. She described her childhood as very happy and filled with community involvement.

The Activist grandmother's eyes lit up as she spoke of her parents referring to her mother as "a great mom" who was a nurse by profession and her father as an

“accomplished chef”. However, when asked about her family growing up, she talked about her love for her grandmother. She continued to say, “No one disagreed with my grandmother.” She referred to her own grandmother’s influence on the family by saying, “she ruled” the family with her wisdom and everyone “abided” by what her grandmother said. The Activist’s grandmother and mother lived long lives. Her own mother lived to be 96 years old.

The Activist grandmother spoke proudly of her father who was a native of the Bahamas before bringing his family to the United States. She shared she still has many family members residing in the Bahamas and she had made plans early in life to retire from her occupation as a nurse and spend her retirement years there with family. Her pride in her lineage came through as she talked about her father and her deceased husband of fifty years, both who were ministers. With pride she emphasized that her father was “a chef, not a cook.”

The Activist grandmother is the mother of three children and described her immediate and her extended family as “close.” As the eldest living member of her family, she speaks to her family members across the county and in the Bahamas often as she explained “everybody calls me at this moment because the wisdom of my grandmother still lives in me...I am also a good texter.” Spirituality is a priority in her life as she says she begins her conversations and text messages to her family with “Good morning or good evening, let’s put God first...now what is the problem?”

The Activist grandmother has parented several grandchildren throughout her life. She began grandmothering when she was 42 years old. Her first grandchild came to live

with her when she was an infant after her mother, the daughter of the Activist grandmother, a teen at the time, could no longer care for her. The Activist grandmother's daughter was diagnosed with a mental illness that prevented her from taking care of her children. The Activist said at the time, the school district did not have home schooling, and her daughter's mental illness prevented her from being successful in a traditional school setting. After some time, CPS gave custody of the first grandchild to the Activist grandmother. Later in life, she began parenting an infant great-granddaughter after her mother, the granddaughter raised by the Activist, attempted to sell the infant to someone. That child was brought to her by a friend who had knowledge of the intent to sell the infant. Afterwards, the daughter of the Activist went on to have two other children, they too were brought to the Activist grandmother after being placed in foster care for a short time; a grandson who was three years old and another granddaughter who was four years old. The Activist currently has a 13 year old great-grandson in her care, the son of one of her granddaughters. She also parented her brother's son who came to live with her at the age of five until he graduated high school and entered college.

When asked to describe her personal educational experience, the Activist grandmother described a very active experience as a student in New York City during the civil rights era. She said, "I had a very happy school life. I was in theater arts, dancing, and I was an activist for civil rights." She continued by saying, "I have been an activist all of my life." She currently still enjoys volunteering in her community.

### **Anna the Activist Grandmother's Interview**

I was originally introduced to the Activist grandmother by a colleague who was

an assistant principal at the middle school where her great-granddaughter was a student. Through his work as an administrator, my colleague met the Activist grandmother and knew she was a gatekeeper to many other grandmothers through her non-profit organization Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren. Once I was given background on the Activist grandmother, I realized I had indeed crossed paths with her as well in the past, not realizing she would be such a great resource in this study.

After months of phone tag, in addition to a brief illness of the Activist grandmother, we finally connected. I initially made a cold call to the Activist grandmother to formally introduce myself and my study. I could tell from the brief phone call that I was connected to a grandmother who held a wealth of knowledge and was eager to share her knowledge with me. A few weeks after our initial phone call, the Activist grandmother and I were together in person as we were both members of a district strategic planning committee made up of district level officials, administrators, teachers, parents, grandparents, and business partners in Dynamic School District. That day, I finally got to meet the Activist grandmother face to face and we both realized we had crossed paths throughout the years, just not realizing we would connect personally through a topic that was important to me and was a platform the Activist grandmother dedicated much of her time and talents to. I later realized I had attended a Christmas benefit gala a couple of years prior which was organized by the Activist grandmother for hundreds of grandparents raising grandchildren. Following our initial interview, a second interview was conducted for me to get clarification of several responses and for the Activist grandmother to ensure that her real life experiences were conveyed.



When I asked the Activist grandmother to “tell me something about yourself,” I had no idea how much information would be packed in her rich and descriptive responses. Activism was an integral part of her life since her early school days in Manhattan, New York as she volunteered in the community and fought feverishly to secure an African American speaker to speak to her senior graduation class. Although she was unsuccessful in her effort, her desire and thirst towards activism grew stronger. She spoke fondly of her participation in the civil rights movement, using the art of writing, theater arts, and interpretative dancing as outlets to express herself.

Activism came into play in her personal life as she spoke of her daughter who suffered from mental illness during a time when little was known or done to assist or treat those impacted, “especially minorities.” Doctors referred to her daughter’s illness as “growing pains” of a teenager. After moving to Texas, the Activist grandmother continued to seek help for her child although she stated, “No one was really addressing mental illness problems in children.” After several years, a multitude of self-destructive behaviors, and many doctors later, her daughter was diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder. Wanting her daughter to continue her education, although traditional school settings were not conducive to her learning, she worked closely with the school district and was instrumental in getting a homebound teacher for her child. However, her daughter’s behavior continued to progress and she eventually left home at 17 years old. After giving birth to a baby girl, CPS placed the infant baby girl in the care and custody of the Activist grandmother. This experience was the first of many times she parented her grandchildren and great-grandchildren and sparked her formation of her non-profit

organization to assist other grandparents who found themselves in similar situations for myriad reasons.

I asked the Activist grandmother how she described her personal characteristics related to successfully grandmothering. She stated she held and still holds a strong belief in positivity. She instilled that mantra in all of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

You can be whatever you want to be in this life, no matter what your parents are, that has nothing to do with who you are. You can do whatever you want to do and be successful. You are not what your mother was. God made each of us as individuals. One thing about this disease is it is not a physical disease, it is a disease of the mind. God put it there and we are Christians and we believe that deeply.

Another personal characteristic described by the Activist grandmother as being a key to successfully grandmothering is the recognition that “God is first.” Her father-in-law was a minister from south Louisiana. As the eldest living member of her family, she expresses daily via text, phone call, or in person, “in everything we put God first.” Even in the hardest of times, the Activist grandmother talked about how God helped her through it all. She spoke candidly of her experiences as a mother and grandmother, recalling the tumultuous times in her life that took great faith to overcome. Her daughter, whose children and grandchildren were under her care, was brutally killed three years ago in the streets of Houston. She described it as a “merciless killing. “They killed her, they beat her in the head and strangled her right here [in Houston].” She also described the

experiences of raising her oldest granddaughter as she watched her “academically brilliant” granddaughter become “out of control” and run away from home several times. Her granddaughter succumbed to death last year as the result of a tragic car accident in Houston. She also has another granddaughter, whom she also raised, who is currently in a mental institution.

Unconditional love is another attribute the Activist grandmother attributed to her effectively grandmothering. Despite the ups and downs and pitfalls experienced, the Activist grandmother stated she never wavered in her love for her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The Activist grandmother stated it is very important for her to be actively involved in whatever activities her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were involved in, just as she was with her children. When she first started parenting grandchildren, she was a working grandmother who worked the graveyard shift as a nurse for 25 years. However, that did not deter her from being involved with her grandchildren. “Everything that happened in the school, I was always there. I worked the graveyard shift for 25 years, but I would always get up by one o’clock and be on that school campus to volunteer. Be in whatever activities and I never missed any meetings they had. I was on any board they had for parents.”

The Activist grandmother also stayed involved in organizations that helped other grandmothers raising grandchildren.

I never left organizations. I have one I formed on my own after raising these kids and the statistics across the country are staggering. I worked with American

Association of Retired Persons (AARP) for a couple of years with grandparents raising grandchildren. I worked closely with them and I formed the organization Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Harris County. I worked, I called, talked to people all over the United States about problems of this nature that are happening in other states. I have had a full life enriching the lives of people. I leased a property for \$35 a month and with the help of [a commissioner, now deceased], I was instrumental in opening the first Harris County Sheriff's Office storefront in my community.

When asked what interpersonal dynamics impacted her effectiveness as a grandmother, the Activist grandmother stated, "If your people are drug addicts, alcoholics, or suffer from mental problems...don't feel guilty. This is nothing to be ashamed of. People like to hide. I brought a lot of families into the open." As a parent, the Activist grandmother adamantly stated she had to put all feelings of guilt aside related to her children and the reasons that put her in the position of parenting grandchildren. "Guilt related to parenting will prevent you from properly caring for the grandchildren who are in need of your care and love." The Activist grandmother spoke of the day when her daughter's other two children "were dropped off" at her house by CPS when they were three and four years old. She stated, "...here I was to raise two more of my daughter's children." She continued to raise them until they were 12 and 13 and went to live with their biological father. The Activist grandmother is currently raising another 13 year old great-grandson who was brought to her after one her of granddaughters and the child's father, described by the Activist as "having beer and marijuana for breakfast,"

failed to properly care for him. She recalled a time when she had a brief moment of guilt in her heart because "...you do all you could to raise them the right way and expose them to the good things in life and they decide to do something different." However, she knew she had to focus on the children, not guilt.

When asked to talk to me about what role, if any, her upbringing played in how she parented her grandchildren, the Activist grandmother reverted back to her spiritual foundation by stating, "The wisdom of my grandmother still lives in me. In everything I put God first. That's the beginning." As the eldest living member of her immediate family, she stated she communicates daily with her family all over the United States. She stated God is the first thing mentioned when she talks to her family. "That is the first thing I say...then I ask, what's the problem? That's where we begin."

I asked the Activist grandmother what values, interests, goals and beliefs influenced the way she parented her grandchildren. To which she responded, "First as a human being you have to be accountable."

You have to be accountable for your actions. Whatever is done in the dark will come to the light. You may think it won't. One way or another some kind of way it has a way of cropping up in your life and you say, Oh my God! But it comes up even before they had social media. You thought it was years ago, but it still comes back. Your behavior, your personal character...I don't think you can do all this wrong as a young person and wash it away. Some kind of way it comes back.

The Activist grandmother said she always talked to her grandchildren and children about

accountability. “God forgives, but man does not. He [man] is going to make you be accountable.

As a child of the civil rights era, the Activist grandmother stated, “Life is not fair. There is no such thing.” Because of that belief, she tried to instill in her grandchildren and great-grandchildren that “Your only success is to go to college. High school is not enough anymore.” This belief was indicative of her quest to continue to help other grandmothers who are raising grandchildren in an effort to provide grandchildren with an opportunity for a productive life.

The conversation switched to me asking her to share some important life experiences that facilitated her decisions about grandmothering. The Activist grandmother confidently stated, “I had an excellent grandmother. I came from an era when grandmothers were the matriarchs. When they spoke, everything stopped. No one disagreed. Whatever they said was the law. Their wisdom had to be acknowledged and followed.” She recalled spending every summer with her grandmother teaching her to cook. She stated it was the same with her husband’s grandmother. He was an only child and whatever his grandmother said, his mother “abided by.” She stated her grandmother was her role model. She stated she used her grandmother’s wisdom to help her determine what was going on with her daughter who suffered from a mental illness.

When I asked the Activist grandmother to discuss her role as a parent and a grandmother to her grandchildren. She emphatically said, “I am the boss, you live here. We love each other, but we work as a team. I am not your pal and I am not your friend. I am the parent.” As a team, they learned together and from one another. But when it is all

said and done she said, “I am the boss at the end.”

The Activist grandmother also stated, “As a grandparent, it was my role to see what was going on with my children and grandchildren.” Despite the “tears and heartaches” suffered as a result of her daughter who suffered from a mental illness, she had to focus on her grandchildren who needed her care. She recalled her first granddaughter becoming “out of control” during junior high school after independently contacting her mother, who was not a positive influence. Shortly after interacting with her mother, her granddaughter began skipping school and not coming home until late at night. “We lost control at this point because she wanted to be in her mom’s company. This is when everything went totally to the left.” The Activist grandmother continued her thought stating as a grandparent raising grandchildren, you have to know how to separate the grandchild from the absent biological parent to see who you need to care for. She stated negative interactions with an absent parent “can cause more harm than good, because if the parent has problems they initiate the situation to their child.”

During her rebellious teen years, her granddaughter gave birth to her first great-granddaughter after running away from home. The Activist grandmother stated when she was informed by a friend that her granddaughter was attempting to sell the child to a family, she intervened and with the help of law enforcement and CPS she took on the role of parent to her first great-granddaughter. She went on to say her granddaughter eventually gave birth to two more children, all of whom she raised. She stated, “I did the best I could with my children.” The Activist believed it was her role as a grandmother to expose her grandchildren to an environment different from the one their

mother chose to live in. “We traveled a lot when my husband was alive.” The goal was to allow her grandchildren and great-grandchildren to see culture through exposure to how others lived.

When determining how parenting children differs from parenting grandchildren, there was no difference for the Activist grandmother. “Basically, you are still my child. I don’t say I am your grandmother, I say I’m Mom.” In parenting, she used the same techniques as she did with her children. However, she stated she could not negate the fact that each grandchild or great-grandchild came to her with varying experiences. With that knowledge, she stated, “I have to change according to what had happened to them in their life.” Although she never faltered in her high expectations and unconditional love, with each circumstance and each child, “I had to figure out how I am going to handle this.” As a writer, the Activist grandmother stated when the children were sleeping, she was writing down her notes about what steps she needed to take to address situations as they arose. After the passing of her husband, she stated “I did not have anyone to talk to, so I would write and sit and think at night.”

I asked the Activist grandmother what techniques and approaches did she use to gain insight into the needs of her grandchildren. Her connection with “God and His Son Jesus Christ and a whole lot of knee bending” was her immediate response. She said she never made a major decision without praying for guidance from God. She also spent time at school watching her grandchildren interact with the teacher and others by “periodically sitting in class and sometimes watching through the door” so they could not see her. She also talked a lot to teachers. “All these things helped me to know the next



move or what I needed to do to help this child.” She attributed these techniques to helping her first granddaughter through her rebellious years. You do all you can and then “you pray that somewhere down the line they make a turn around like my oldest granddaughter did. She made a turnaround.”

As the interview progressed, I asked the Activist grandmother what obstacles or restrictions caused her the greatest concern in her role as a grandmother parenting grandchildren. She responded by addressing academics. She felt the school did not always respect grandmothers as parents. “The Leave it to Beaver family is gone and schools do not always know how to handle that.” She addressed her belief that college does not teach teachers how to deal with students from non-traditional family settings and the behaviors they display. Because of the lack of knowledge, she said grandparents often feel unwelcomed at school. “It is hard for grandparents because the schools don’t want you there.”

Perceptions of all members of the educational setting about older grandparents was cited by the Activist grandmother as another obstacle she had to overcome as a parent. She stated she has had to correct assumptions that her grandchildren were not well taken care of and “where living on mattresses without enough food.” These perceptions caused many to believe that students being raised by grandparents don’t have the same academic support of their peers living with their parents. She said educators must realize that grandparents, especially older grandparents, worked as professionals and went to college and have more education than they do. “We are not on welfare like some younger grandmothers might be.”

It hurts the children because they feel embarrassed because it is not mom or dad coming to the school and some kids tease them. You have to teach them to be strong people. I tell them I am mom and dad and don't let what they say stop you. That is Satan moving in and you have to wash him away. You let go and let God and it will all work out. Even when the children are young you have to teach them that. And I will be with you in this walk. I am adamant about being on campus letting principals and teachers know don't put the child down and think he is less than because the mother or dad is not in the picture.

When I asked the Activist grandmother how her personal and professional life had been impacted by her decision to parent her grandchildren, she started by sharing the plans she and her husband made for retirement.

I should be in the Bahamas. I have nephews that live there. I should be in one of their apartments living or visiting. When my husband was alive, I got to travel. He would babysit, but now he is gone, there is no more traveling. I do very little. I am here in my office as a public servant in Harris County. All of my family is scattered. My oldest daughter lives in Pennsylvania, my son is a serviceman in the Marines and my daughter who was bipolar, someone killed her three years ago. I have had to slow down my life for many things, but I have had a full life. I like being involved. I have had a full life, but I had to slow my life down for many things. 2017 was not my best year, due to some health problems, but I am still going...my life really has not stopped. I organized a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren conference and I feel really good about it. There are so many

needing help, millions, and there is no way we can have too many organizations coming up, if they are for the right thing.

The Activist grandmother shared that she suffered a stroke in 2017. However, she still remained active in her Grandparents Raising Grandchildren organization and is often called to speak at conferences. She is also active in Dynamic School District, where her grandchildren attend. She has a several yearly conferences for grandmothers raising grandchildren, and is involved in the district's parent expo. "I am still active in the district and on every committee." She has not allowed her health concerns deter her activism.

The interview switched gears to perceptions about grandmothering that supports academic achievement. I began this phase of the interview by asking the Activist grandmother how she established a positive learning environment at home for her grandchildren. "I am a learner with them." She stated:

I learn from them. We study in my household. There are no games, we don't own any. We have television, and I have control of it. I know how to lock it up when I tell you don't look at it. We study a lot, 90% of the time. We eat together at the kitchen table. We have a library in the kitchen and we still believe in Britannica and Webster's Dictionary and not on the phones. We have three computers, but not in their rooms. As far as doing work, they are confined to a place that I have...I'm in touch with them.

I then asked the Activist grandmother to describe a difficult decision she had to make as a grandmother and how did it impact her grandchildren's education. She

reflectively recalled a brief time when her granddaughter was sent to a juvenile facility for troubled teens. She stated, “It was very difficult decision for me to let my oldest one go to [the juvenile facility]. It was hard, but she needed it. She was out of control. It was very hard to let her go down there. This was a difficult decision.” She felt the decision gave her granddaughter insight into the good life she had at home. When her granddaughter returned home from her stay at the facility, her reflection revealed to her “Grandma is supplying you with your needs and your wants. Why would you want to leave?” However, she recalled her granddaughter eventually began hanging out with the same crowd of people and her wanting to belong superseded what she knew was right. Her friends would tell her she had it better at home than they did, but “she wanted to be in the streets.” She also credited her faith in God as key to getting her through this difficult decision.

The Activist grandmother’s commitment to her role as a grandmother and parent led her to the conclusion that “you can’t salvage everything, even though they are your own. You have to keep praying and realize you are going to lose some battles.” This realization led to another difficult decision. She stated:

Another difficult decision was when I had to divorce my daughter, the one that was bipolar and was killed a few years ago. She was so dramatic with everything that was wrong. She wanted to fight and I am not a fighting person. She would climb over the fence and break into the house or whatever. I had to totally divorce her. I also divorced my first granddaughter about 12 years ago, after my husband passed away. I was getting older and now my great-granddaughter was

in the house. She came to me and said, '[Mom] has problems but deep down she's good.' She said do you mind if I talk to her. I told her no, you can talk to her, but I will not tolerate her coming to my house and talking crazy and clowning on my property. We live a quiet life.

The decision to divorce her daughter had a positive impact on her granddaughter until she went back to the negative environment of her peers. Regarding her decision to divorce her granddaughter, the Activist grandmother feels the decision was vital in the academic success of her great-granddaughter who is 20 years old and currently a junior at University in Texas. She talked to her great-granddaughter about the decisions her mother made and the consequences. I told her, "I want you to watch, look, and listen. You are at the age that God has given you the knowledge of right and wrong." The Activist grandmother attributed the maturity of her great-granddaughter as key to her ability to communicate with her mother in a manner that her mother listened. "She talked to her mother like she's the mother." Her great-granddaughter is pursuing a life different from the one her mother experienced.

I asked the Activist grandmother to reflect on her experience as a grandmother raising grandchildren and name some key aspects that sustained her effectiveness over time. After a brief pause, she again reverted to her spiritual foundation as the one effective factors in her grandmothering. She said, "Faith in God carried me through it all." She reflected on her nights of sitting and talking with God when she felt she couldn't do anymore. She still gets evening calls from her great-granddaughter after she leaves her part-time job and heads back to campus. She said their conversation always

ends up with God as a topic. They talk about what happened at school and how to avoid getting involved in the partying and misbehavior that exists. “She follows what I tell her to do. And every morning we say good morning and God bless you.”

I asked the Activist to describe her role in her grandchildren’s education. She remembered, “They were all academically brilliant kids, they just did not have the go get it for getting it all.” She made sure they all went to school each day and other than the oldest granddaughter, skipping school, she did not have a problem with school attendance. She further stated:

I was there. I was present with them the same way I was with my biological children. Just the way I was with their moms and dads. I even went part-time on my job as a nurse at one time. I retired in the 90’s. I am involved. I am still president of the civic club and I am president of our Council of PTA in the district. I am still doing. Everyone in the district knows me. I have been active in the district for 45 years so I know a lot of them. Just like the 13 year old, he was a terror last year when he was trying to make friends. I got involved with the teacher and told her she can email me or text me and I will be there in five or ten minutes.

Teaching her grandchildren the importance of education and determination were also important roles identified by the Activist grandmother. “I have always been in the lives of my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I always found out what was positive. What do they need to go to college? Which college was best? The school did not always tell me, I had to find out. Then that taught them if you want to be

something get on the ball and find out for yourself.” As her grandchildren and great-grandchildren grew up, she made them search for themselves when it came to education. She stated she told them she would stand with them, but she was not going to do the work for them.

As with all participants, I posed my final question to the Activist grandmother. I asked if there was anything that I did not ask or anything she wanted to add about her experience as an African American grandmother raising grandchildren or about the education of African American grandchildren raised by grandmothers. To which, she was eager to respond. Without hesitation, she reflected on the negative concept surrounding African American grandparents raising grandchildren. She stated:

That’s why my role has been so hard in the community. I tell these grandparents to go to that school and follow through. Don’t let them tell you that a child is ADHD, don’t let the school diagnose your child. Don’t put them on medication if they don’t need it. I love people and you cannot hate because of what is going on in society. You learn to interact in it to try to make a positive change. That is what I am trying to do with Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. You need to take care of your own.

The Activist grandmother went on to say that when she interacts with grandparents and their grandchildren, she does not see color. “This is not a local thing or a race thing, this is a universal problem.” She also stated that many of the individuals making decisions don’t have the best interest of the children placed in the [foster] system as a priority. She feels money is not being spent to support grandparenting organizations

like hers. She vehemently stated, “This is not a Black cause or a White cause, it’s an American cause! Once they realize that the focus can be on resolving the issues surrounding grandparents raising grandchildren.”

### **Irene the Industrious Grandmother’s Profile**

My interaction with the Industrious grandmother did not require introductory dialogue because of my relationship with her. Although she did not immediately come to mind when I began to consider participants, her experience grandmothing makes her narrative an important part of this research study. Our meeting took place at my childhood home in a very inviting kitchen that brings back fond memories. As I walked into the house, I could smell the aroma of the fresh tea cakes she had just taken out of the oven. In the room next to the kitchen is a large display of handmade jewelry, her latest undertaking. Needless to say, I felt very welcomed in the setting.

Before me sat my mother, a very poised and vibrant 80 year old mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Her stylist haircut and denim attire was an indication that she was not limited by her chronological age. Our meeting had been rescheduled previously because of her busy schedule and active lifestyle. She has just returned from a weekend with friends enjoying a day on the beach.

As a young child, I have fond memories of an industrious mother making all my clothes with such expertise that no one ever knew they were not purchased at a store. She even took tailoring classes and made suits for my step-father. My eldest nephew even took up sewing in high school after years of watching her. She is also an excellent quilter and has taught quilting classes at church to introduce the hobby to young adults and teens



who had not heard of the art. Birthdays were special because she made customized cakes with intricate details. There is not much that she has not tried and mastered.

We began the interview with a brief moment for her to look over the questions again as she gathered her thoughts and responses. I explained that I would be asking questions that I have knowledge of, but the purpose of the interview was to gather her recollection of the lived experiences regarding her act of grandmothering my eldest niece and two nephews. We had previously discussed my interest in the study at hand and my desire to add to a research topic with limited research in relation to student achievement.

The Industrious grandmother grew up in the same small town as the Steadfast grandmother, Midway, TX. She grew up in a farming community on a 100 acre ranch owned by her grandmother, a business woman well before her time. She is the third oldest of thirteen children born to her mother and father. Three of whom passed away at birth or shortly after birth. She recalled taking care of her younger siblings as her two older sisters had to help with the chores on the farm. Her large extended family spans across the United States and she described it as a “close knit” family. Her parents passed away when they were both well into their 80s. Three years separated their deaths. I remember my grandparents deaths was a huge jolt to my entire family. They were a vital part of our everyday lives as children and as adults.

She is the mother of four daughters and one son. She raised one granddaughter, who is now 43 years old and two grandsons, one who is 20 and the other is 15 years old. She has a 15 year old great-granddaughter, whom she did not raise. Although she has many talents, she worked as a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) and pediatric nurse

from 1968 until she retired about ten years ago. She is still actively involved in her church and travels often across the U.S. to attend conventions and conferences. She was married to her second husband 38 years until his death six years ago.

I asked the Industrious grandmother to describe her personal educational experience as a student. To which she responded:

I finished high school at George Washington Carver High School in 1955. I was a good student. I graduated fifth in my class, at that time the class consisted of maybe 20 students. I was never active in sports, but I always liked school. When I was in school, it was so different than it is now. We had such good rapport with the teachers and we did a lot of things together. I've always liked education. I was involved with some type of education after high school. I took floral design class, I went to cosmetology school and was a beautician. I took cake designing classes, and I am a jewelry maker. I just like doing things.

She said she always desired to set a good example for her children and grandchildren and did not want them to ever limit themselves. This is evident in the many activities and educational endeavors pursued by the Industrious grandmother.

### **Irene the Industrious Grandmother's Interview**

The Industrious grandmother and I finally decided on a date and time to conduct the interview. Following our initial interview and triangulation phase of the research, a second interview was conducted for me to get clarification of several responses and for the Industrious grandmother to ensure that her real life experiences were conveyed. Because of the relationship, pleasantries and small talk was skipped and we went right

into the interview. I asked Industrious to tell me something about herself. She proudly stated, “I am 80 years old.” I understand the pride with which she responded to the question, as I have witnessed constant remarks by others that the Industrious grandmother looks decades younger than her age. She went on to tell me that she realized years ago, “Happiness is a gift I give myself.” She revealed that mantra has been what has helped her maintain her peace and sanity as she navigated throughout the experiences of life. One might say, it also manifested itself in her active lifestyle and constant thirst to engage in new experiences and hobbies.

When asked when her first grandchildren came to live with her, the Industrious grandmother, thoughtfully calculated the years as she looked up and reflectively said her first granddaughter came to live with her at the age of two and a half after her mother and father separated and eventually divorced. She was 38 years old at the time. She continued by stating her daughter’s subsequent drug addiction prevented her from properly caring for her only child and the Industrious grandmother’s only grandchild, at the time. She recalled prior to this time, her daughter was a great mother and caregiver. Her granddaughter continued to live with her until she graduated high school. She stated:

My second grandchild, which is my oldest grandson, came to me at the age of three months, after the courts awarded his father, my son, full custody. He stayed with me until he graduated from high school, entered college for a year, and entered the U.S. Army in September of 2017. And my other grandson, his younger brother, lived with me for three and a half years until he went back to live with his mother.

I asked the Industrious grandmother what significant personal qualities, values, and behaviors were important while raising grandchildren. She stated being a good role model was key. “You have to be a good role model and disciplinarian. You must maintain high moral standards, consistency, and flexibility while making expectations known and reward good behavior while giving fair consequences.” She revealed she learned early on in her experience as a grandmother and parent that she had to be flexible.

Other attributes described by the Industrious grandmother were to show love and patience while allowing them to be themselves. “You have to allow them to express themselves.” Being raised in a large family taught her how to get along and communicate. She and her siblings were taught to love one another and look out for one another and she wanted the same for her grandchildren. Although she loved her grandchildren, she described sternness as an important attribute to be an effective grandmother raising grandchildren.

When asked to reflect on her personal life experiences that facilitated her decision to parent her grandchildren, the Industrious grandmother went back to her childhood growing up in a very stable family environment. She said, “My family has always meant so much to me.” She further stated:

I had both my parents when I was growing up. However, they were not formally educated and did not know how to encourage us in regards to our education. So, I wanted to prepare my grandchildren for life experiences by being a good role model and providing them with a stable living environment they did not have with their parents. I also wanted to provide guidance and protection for my

grandchildren. Some things I had to learn on my own, like setting goals. My parents did the best they could at the time.

I then asked what interpersonal dynamics impacted her effectiveness as a grandmother and parent to her grandchildren. The Industrious grandmother stated, “I was motivated out of love and necessity. I wanted to keep my grandchildren out of the system [CPS]. I wanted to give the protection that their parents did not give them. Their parents were not good for them. There were a lot of drug abuse issues.” The Industrious grandmother stated at one point her grandson’s mother offered him alcohol during a visit at her home.

I then posed the question asking what role, if any, her own upbringing played in the way she parented her grandchildren. She stated:

My upbringing was very important as far as the morals instilled in me and I wanted by children and grandchildren to understand that the goals you set for yourself dictates the kind of life you will have. I did not understand how to set goals for myself. I had to learn on my own. No one stressed that for me. Be careful and always chose good friends. [Growing up] we were protected in the type of people we could associate with. Religion was instilled in us and we always had to attend worship, obey God and obey our parents. We tried to associate with people who had the same morals and religious values.

I extended the question by asking what values, interests, goals, and beliefs influenced the way the Industrious grandmother parented her grandchildren both personally and academically. Goal setting was evident as an important part of personal

and academic success as it again came up as a response.

I pushed academics and goal setting and focusing on your own interests. I wanted them to have a good life and make good decisions. I limited myself and I did not do as well as I could have and I did not want them to do the same thing. I did not focus early in life. I got pregnant early in life and that was a bad decision because I limited myself by being a parent. I got married and there were things that I had a desire to do, but I had limited myself and I could not do them and that caused me to struggle.

The Industrious grandmother said she always wanted to go to college or to the military after high school. However, after motherhood and marriage she chose a different path. “I felt like I limited myself. If had gone to college I feel like I could have had a more successful professional life. I did not want them to make the same mistakes. I wanted them to focus on their interests.” Her dedication to encouraging her grandchildren to pursue their own interests was evident as she supported and encouraged her grandson’s decision to join the U. S. Army after completing a year of college. Although he was encouraged to attend college and pursue a degree of his choice, after attempting to fulfill the goals of the family, he decided to follow his own dream of a military career.

I asked the Industrious grandmother to discuss any techniques and approaches used to gain insight into the needs of her grandchildren. She stated, “We talked.” She continued and said she always encouraged her grandchildren to talk to her about anything. She also communicated often with teachers. When her oldest grandson was

five years old, she sought outside professional counseling, after he expressed concern for his other siblings in his mother's care being abused. She also discussed the matter with his pediatrician, who agreed that counseling would be of great benefit to her grandson. He continued counseling until he was in high school. She also sought professional counseling for herself as she raised her grandchildren.

When asked to describe any obstacles or restrictions that caused her concern as a grandmother raising grandchildren, the Industrial grandmother took only seconds before she told of how her now deceased husband, and step-grandfather to her granddaughter and biological grandfather to her grandsons, responded to her commitment to parent her granddaughter. I detected a sad tone in her voice as she stated:

One obstacle while raising my granddaughter was the fact that she was not my husband's biological granddaughter. I had a second marriage. She was not welcomed, he did not want me to keep her and I did so against his will. That presented many obstacles. He was not very nice to her. We went through struggles, she and I, from the age of two and a half until she graduated high school. He felt that her parents should be the one's taking care of her. I knew they were not in a position to do that and it caused problems all along because I was determined that I was not going to send her away. He did not want me to buy anything for her. When we went to amusement parks, he did not give her money. When I tried to feed her, he thought I was putting too much food on her plate and she should eat it all. She could not turn on the TV, because he thought she would break it. She was not free to do things children normally do.

These restrictions were very apparent for the Industrious grandmother and others in the home as she had a son who was only two years younger than her granddaughter. She stated her husband made obvious differences between the two as he gave their son a weekly allowance and he did not give her granddaughter one. The restrictions placed on her granddaughter were restrictions her only son, raised with her granddaughter, and her grandsons never experienced. When asked how her husband responded to her grandmothering her oldest grandson, she stated, “My husband thought he hung the moon.”

She stated her husband showered both her son and oldest grandson with love and attention to the point that his other biological children and her stepchildren “resented the way my oldest grandson was being treated because they felt their father was doing things with him that he did not do with them when they were children. They resented that and that also presented an obstacle.” She further noted that her stepchildren did not uphold her husband and their father in the way he treated her oldest granddaughter. She stated, “And they told him that she needed us and they knew that his actions were presenting obstacles.”

When I asked if her personal and professional life changed at all due to her decision to grandmother her grandchildren, the Industrious grandmother stated she was happy she made the decisions to care for all three of her grandchildren, including the one grandson that only stayed with her for three and a half years. “I don’t think it impacted by professional life at all. I still worked and I continued to do things I wanted to do. Me being a nurse and such like, I was able to really take care of them from a physical



standpoint. I was a pediatric nurse, so I had a lot of experience with children and childhood illnesses.”

According to the Industrious grandmother that professional expertise as a nurse was key in her act of grandmothering. Regarding any changes to her personal life, she stated she had to find a babysitter for her grandson who came to live with her at three months old. “I had to find someone responsible to keep him while I was at work.” She recalled parenting an infant while in her 60’s. As he entered school, she detailed how she had to help him with his homework and all the “things regular parents do.”

She admitted that at her age it was more difficult than it would have been if she was younger. Since her grandchildren were athletes, she stated, “I had to go with them to their activities that I wouldn’t necessarily have had to been involved in had I not been a grandmother raising them.” She said her family always attended their sporting events, but her involvement required her to participate as a mother and not in the role of a grandmother.

I asked the Industrious grandmother how parenting grandchildren differed from parenting her children. She replied, “Well, there were a lot of differences.” She stated she did not have outside interference when parenting her children. She also stated that when she was raising her grandsons, they were monitored by CPS because of the status of their two other siblings in foster care. As a result, she could not spank him as she did her children and her granddaughter when they misbehaved. However, she parented her grandchildren as a parent not a grandmother. She stated, “I did everything for them that I did for my children.” She said she was their parent.

The conversation shifted to how she perceived her role as grandmother impacted her grandchildren's education and academic success. I asked the Industrious grandmother how she went about establishing a positive learning environment for her grandchildren that supported their academic success. She stated one way she invested in their academic success was by making sure they had the equipment and tools, such as computers and materials for projects. They had "everything they needed in school." Homework was important and she always checked on grades by their progress reports and report cards and constantly communicating with their teachers. She stated, "I needed to find out when there was a problem, if they were focusing or not turning in something that needed to be turned in. There were times when they did not turn in homework." The Industrious grandmother was adamant that her grandchildren devoted time to studying and not just playtime after school. When their work was not done, they would be punished by losing privileges such as television time, video game time, and taking away the cell phone, with her grandson. When her granddaughter was in school, cell phones were not a common thing.

The Industrious grandmother stated high expectation were established at a young age and the Industrious grandmother made sure her grandchildren's teachers were aware of her expectation. Teachers would call when "laziness" set in. As athletes, both grandchildren knew grades were important as well. The Industrious grandmother stated the entire family made these expectations known to her grandchildren. As a result, she believed the encouragement and high expectations helped them be successful throughout school. Her children were instrumental in encouraging and supporting her grandchildren

in and out of school. She stated, “Family was very important.”

I asked the Industrious grandmother to talk to me about a difficult decision she had to make as a grandmother that impacted her grandchildren’s education. She replied:

As far as my granddaughter...I think during the time she was in school she would daydream a lot about getting her parents back together. And for that reason, I don’t think she applied herself at school the way she could have. Because all she was waiting to do was to get on that bus [afterschool] and get off at her [paternal] grandmother’s house to see her daddy. She felt that she could get them back together. That was her goal. She was not thinking about school when she left in the morning, she was looking forward to getting off the bus at that house in the afternoon, which was really hard for her.

As a result, the Industrious grandmother had to stop her from going to her dad’s house after school.

Regarding a difficult decision she had to make related to her grandson, she replied:

I had some difficult decisions, because even though he did not live with his mom, she was still his mother and there were times when no matter what, children love their mother. There were times when she wanted him to come around her and such like and I did not feel that was good. It created an issue because she did not have his best interest at heart. She basically wanted to get back at me because she was angry that CPS had given full custody to my son. She never accepted that and she did things to aggravate...she would want to see him and he knew that was

his mother. The hard decision was to allow him to spend time with her, which I really did not want to do.

When I asked how that impacted his education, she stated he was not concentrating on his school work, he was preoccupied with the conflict between she and his mother, and the bad decisions his mother often made regarding him. He was also concerned about his three other siblings in his mother's care prior to their placement in foster homes. His younger brother, the son of the Industrious grandmother's son, eventually came to live with her as well. During her grandson's junior high school days, she stated:

At first he could not see her for what she really was and when he finally realized how she was, he did not want to be around her. So he focused on what he wanted to do in school and in his life. That was a big factor in his happiness. He accepted that she was not good for him and the things she was doing were not good for him. She once offered him alcohol. He knew she was doing drugs. He did not want to accept it, but he finally accepted the fact that she was doing drugs and was not stable enough to give him advice. He then started focusing on what he needed to do for himself. When she would call or want to do things, he did not want to go with her. He did not care to be around her anymore. He also knew we did not get along and he did not like that either. He wanted us to be friends and it affected him a lot until he accepted the fact that she was not good for him.

As the interview was winding down, I asked the Industrious grandmother what key factors of grandmothering led to her grandchildren successfully graduating high

school. She reverted back to her earlier response of setting high expectations at an early age. “Well, my granddaughter knew that I had expectations and the family did as well. She knew what was expected. As an athlete we encouraged her. Well, my husband did not. Me and my children encouraged her. She knew the expectations and she graduated.” In relation to her grandsons, she had the same high expectations. He was also an athlete and involved heavily in the martial arts, Taekwondo. She stated, “He was a second degree black belt” by the time he entered junior high school. “Taekwondo also had high standards” and that was key in reaffirming the discipline and values he learned at home. “The things I expected of them as far as education and such like, was always a must for me.” High expectations and moral principles did not change.

Beyond school, the Industrious grandmother stated she kept her grandchildren involved in church activities as well. “It was always very important that they went to church and worshiped God.” They were engaged in youth activities and summer camps through their entire life. “So they were always involved in spirituality, my children and grandchildren.” She also stated a key factor was for her not to neglect her own emotional welfare. She stated she keep involved in her hobbies.

The Industrious grandmother also stated she talked to her grandchildren, especially her grandson, about being African American and male in our current society. She stated they discussed some of the obstacles that may be encountered. “I had to let them know that no matter what, just give it your best. Be respectful.” She said she told them they had to work a little harder sometimes to get the same success as other races because of some perceptions of African Americans. She went on to say:

One, you are Black and you are male. The struggles for you will be harder. Be careful because some expect Black males to fail. I did not want them to buy-in to that lie. I did not want them getting into the [penal] system. He realized also the hurdles he would have to climb that others did not have to because he was an African American male. So he put forth double efforts.

The interview ended with the final statement. Is there anything you would like to add that I did not ask about yourself, your experience, about being an African American grandmother raising grandchildren, and/or about the education of African American children raised by grandmothers? The Industrious grandmother began her reply with, “Number one, stress morals and values. Teach them to be outstanding citizens and always give everything their best. Do your best.” Secondly, “Even if they are from a family that is in the [penal] system and on welfare, it doesn’t have to be a family tradition.” Thirdly, “Carry yourself in a way that no matter what, you demand respect.” Fourth, she stated, “For your failures, you can’t blame other people. We can’t blame our shortcomings on others. Don’t go around with a chip on your shoulder.” She went on to say African American in today’s society have to take responsibility for our own actions. She stated she is a firm believer that if you were not taught somethings in your upbringing, you have to take the initiative to learn things from others and on your own. Some grandparents just didn’t know any better because they repeated what they were accustomed to doing.” She ended her interview by stating, “You are not better than anybody, but you are just as good as anybody!” She revealed this mantra was instilled in her children and grandchildren from a very early age and she still believes it for herself.

## **Analysis of Findings**

The grandmothers involved in this study had similar stories to tell regarding their experiences raising grandchildren. Despite the length of time they parented their grandchildren, whether from birth or if they came to live with them after living with their parents for a time, commonalities of the experiences emerged: The four predominant themes common among all participants are: (1) strong parental influence in their own lives; (2) a strong spiritual influence; (3) limited interactions between grandchild and absent parent; and (4) a commitment to the needs of their grandchildren over all else. Each grandmother discussed and describes the influence and impact their parents or grandparents played in their acts of grandmothering. They each discussed a strong belief in God and a focus on faith in His ability to see them through any obstacle. All the participants expressed a need to limit the interactions between grandchildren and their parents. They also described circumstances and situations that required them to consider the needs of their grandchildren over anything and everyone else.

### **Strong Parental Influence**

As each participant articulated their stories, it was apparent that their parents and/or grandparents played a major role in their decision to raise grandchildren and in shaping their acts of grandmothering. It is not uncommon to see African American grandmothers from previous generations raising their grandchildren. They were doing what they saw their mothers and grandmothers doing. The Compassionate grandmother tells how her grandparents wanted to go to school, but they could not attend because they were born into slavery. That experience was key in her act of grandmothering regarding

academic achievement. She states:

I would rather stay with them than stay with my parents. I had good parents, but it was just a special love I had for my grandparents. My grandparents definitely raised me. I think they did a real good job. When we was coming up, when I was small, we noticed our grandparents couldn't read as well as we could. And then one day my grandmother sat us down and told us, 'I may not can read as good as you, I may not can add as good as you, but I have the wisdom to teach you more than just reading and adding. I have life experiences that you need in life.'

She also told a very poignant story of how her grandparents taught her to raise her own grandchildren, even if she did not want to. She recalled her grandmothers' belief that no one else would show the love and understanding like a grandparent will. Raised in a family that communicated the value of helping one another. The Compassionate grandmother said parenting her grandchildren was the best decision for her family.

The Steadfast grandmother recalled the strong parental influence of her mother as the pattern set before her at a young age. She stated, "My mom was always very strong in doing the right thing. That made me feel like I had to be very strong and doing the right thing." For that reason, her mother's example also led to her adamant stance in what she felt was the best decision for her granddaughter when her daughter decided she was going to move out on her own. The example of strength and firmness contributed to her decision to raise her granddaughter. "You have to stay steadfast in what you believe is right and necessary." The example set before her by her own mother led her to believe her decision was the "right thing" to do at all cost, even at the expense of her relationship



with her only daughter. Furthermore, her son who did not agree with Steadfast bestowing the same privileges on her granddaughter as she did her children.

The Activist grandmother was the most expressive about the influence her parents had on her life as a child and an adult. Her eyes lit up when she spoke of her “great mom” and her grandmother who she said, “ruled the family with her wisdom.” She also stated, “The wisdom of my grandmother still lives in me.” She also said everyone in the family, including her father, “abided” by whatever her grandmother said. “I had an excellent grandmother, I came from the era when grandparents were the matriarchs. Whatever they said was the law. Their wisdom was to be acknowledged and followed. I learned everything from my grandmother. My mother and father were also very good people.” While raising her children and grandchildren, like her grandmother, she ruled her house. Her grandmother’s example and influence was key in how she raised her grandchildren.

The Industrious grandmother told of the strong influence of her mother and father as she said, “My family has always meant so much to me. My parents were always there to do whatever it was that we needed done in our lives. So I just felt like my grandchildren should have the same opportunities that I had.” Referring to her parents, she stated, “My upbringing was very important as far as the morals instilled in me.” She wanted her grandchildren. She too was influenced by her parents who raised grandchildren.

The Steadfast grandmother, the Activist grandmother, and the Industrious grandmother all spoke of being raised in two parent households as children. The

Compassionate grandmother did not speak a lot about her parents, but was very clear about the impact her grandparents had on her growing up. This is true in the African American culture as mothers and grandmothers are held in high esteem. Both the Steadfast and Industrious grandmothers spoke of being born in the same small town with both parents present her entire life. Steadfast experienced her parents being married over 50 years and Industrious experienced her parents being married 68 years. The Activist grandmother spoke fondly of both her mother and grandmother and the strong examples they set early in life and throughout her own 50 year marriage. It was clear that all grandmothers had prominent mothers and grandmothers who played an important role in their decision to parent again as well as how they parented their grandchildren.

### **Strong Spiritual Influence**

Throughout all grandmother interviews, it was evident that spirituality had a significant influence on their acts of grandmothing. Spirituality was a foundation for their lives period. Each grandmother discussed in detail the influence their faith in God and spirituality played out in their experience parenting again.

The Compassionate grandmother stated spirituality was engrained as a small child as her grandmother taught her about faith in God. She was adamant that she would teach her grandchildren to have faith in God. She expressed strong emotions when she said, “You got to put faith in them. They need faith. They need understanding.” She went on to say, “A lot of people do not want to put them in church, but you need to put them in church. Please put them in church.”

Prayer was a key factor and she taught her grandchildren how to pray for their

parents. She stated she prayed that God would protect her grandchildren when they were not within her watchful eyes. The Compassionate grandmother spoke empathically about her belief that “God is in control.” She even told the CPS worker, “God’s the blessing for me to be here to taken them,” when she made the decision to take custody of her grandchildren.

She credited her caring and compassionate spirit to her faith and belief in God. “They don’t hear me complaining about their parents. I always tell them you know your parents are in a place where they need help. We all have to pray for them. Every night we pray for their parents. When we go to church we put them on the prayer list.” She spoke of wanting her grandchildren to grow up witnessing her faith by “showing compassion and love” to their parents while in the midst of their crisis.

The Steadfast grandmother stated she realized early in life that God was important. “I was brought up realizing the importance of God and the importance of doing what God wants you to so.” Attending worship service was also important to her. “Worshiping God was so ingrained in me until I felt attending worship was just part of me that I had to worship God to be successful and to live the way I felt like God wanted me to live. I wanted this child brought up the same way.” She maintained she wanted her granddaughter to realize the importance of God in her life. “I wanted to be sure she had a safe environment as well as a spiritual environment.” She considered spirituality as an aspect that sustained her overtime. “Spiritual strength and attending bible classes taught me a lot of things that were necessary. I think being able to follow that path or direction was one of the things that I feel like made me strong.” She stated her strong

foundation in religion as “the rock that made me the person I am.” She revealed she wanted the same for her granddaughter.

The Activist grandmother had a similar story of faith in God and conveyed her belief that “God put each of us here for a purpose.” When communicating with her family she always reminds them to put God first. “I am a good texter now and everything is put God first. That’s the beginning. Good morning, good evening, let’s put God first. That is the first thing I say.” Even today, she instills that in her grandchildren and great grandchildren. She conveyed, “You can be whatever you want to be in this life, no matter what your parents are, that has nothing to do with you. You can do whatever you want to do and be successful. God made each of us as individuals. We are Christians and we believe deeply.” She reiterated several times, “In everything I put God first.” She recalled telling her grandchildren, “God forgives, even if man does not.” When faced with difficult decisions, she said, “I pray and waited for God to direct my actions and decisions.” Speaking about her faith in God and prayer, the Activist shared, “God and His Son Jesus Christ and a whole lot of knee bending” got her through difficult times. She talked to God late at night when her grandchildren were “sleeping soundly” upstairs. She recalled her faith in God carried her through some of the horrific experiences such as the brutal murder of her daughter and the accidental death of her granddaughter.

The Industrious grandmother shared a story that paralleled the other three grandmother’s strong spiritual influence. She told she has been an active member of her church for 68 years. “I work in the church organizing different ladies fellowships and I

teach Sunday school classes.” Religious principles and attending worship service was an expectation for her as a child and she instilled it in her grandchildren as well at a young age. “I’ve come from a religious family. So church has always been important. Religion was instilled in us and we always had to attend worship, obey God, and obey our parents. Both she and her grandchildren were actively involved in church activities and associated with others who shared the same religious principles. Her grandchildren attended church camp throughout their entire childhood. “From a religious standpoint, I always try to be an example for them.” She further contended:

I knew that whatever I did I needed the help of God. So I always solicited prayer from Him to help me through whatever it was. There was even a time that I took my husband before the elders for them to talk to him because of the problems we were having. No matter what, I had to live the life of a Christian no matter what he did. I still had to obey God rather than him.

The Industrious grandmother recalled she tried to associate with people who had morals and religious values similar to her own growing up.

### **Limited Interactions between Grandchild and Parent**

Negative life experiences in the lives of grandchildren are precipitating factors in grandmothers raising their grandchildren. As children are placed in negative environments, as no fault of their own, grandmothers who are raising them seek to protect them from the impact these negative influences might have throughout their childhood and into their adult lives. Therefore, limiting, and in some cases eliminating, time spent with the parent or parents was mentioned as a necessity to properly care for

grandchildren.

This sentiment was conveyed throughout the interviews of all four grandmothers as they all conveyed the necessity to limit the interactions between the parent(s) encountering the negative events and their grandchildren. Each discussed that carrying out this imperative ground rule was not easy and was often confusing and frustrating for their grandchildren who were caught in the middle.

The grandmothers discussed in detail the obstacles caused when the grandchildren spent time with their parent or parents while they were raising them. The Compassionate grandmother told of the difficulties her grandchildren encountered when she had to make the decision for the parents to stay away when she was raising her grandchildren.

It really was one of the hardest things for me. It really was not for me, it was for them. For the parents to stay away from them because it was hard for them to go by my rules and what their parents were doing. You can't be a parent and be a friend at the same time. After a while, the child will show you no respect. You can't be their friend. I think that could get the children really confused. But they [parents] have to understand that they are not the ones raising them. They are not sitting up every night when they are sick. They are not the one feeding them and clothing them. They are sometimes parents or no time parents.

The Compassionate grandmother stated her decision to limit the interactions was necessary after witnessing her grandchildren having difficulties readjusting to her rules after being with their parents and witnessing the negative experiences that brought them into her care. She conveyed she had to be firm and tell the parents, "That street stuff,

leave it in the streets. Do not bring it in my house because I don't teach them that. I say if you can't come to my house the way I raised you, do not bring that here. You do not come here."

The Steadfast grandmother said her daughter did not agree with her decision to keep her granddaughter when she moved out of the home. She said her daughter lived by a different set of values that she did not feel were in the best interest of her granddaughter. For that reason she "put her foot down" and refused to allow her granddaughter to be around her daughter's crowd of friends and exposed to an environment that made the Steadfast grandmother uncomfortable. "I did not like the crowd she was associating herself with and I felt like this was not the environment that I wanted this baby to be in. I needed to keep this child in an environment that was conducive to good living and right living." Once the Steadfast grandmother made up her mind, "that was what happened." She stated she did not care what her daughter thought about keeping her granddaughter away from her. She stated, "It did not bother me." Limited interactions were the rule from the time her granddaughter came home from the hospital.

Both the Activist and the Industrious grandmothers told stories of the destructive behaviors of the parents of their grandchildren which made eliminating time with the children a necessity. The Activist grandmother spoke of times when her oldest granddaughter would sneak and contact her mother without her permission. After interacting with her mother, the Activist recalled her granddaughter's behavior deteriorating and taking a negative turn.

She became a problem when she independently contacted her mother and things began to go downhill. By this time she was in junior high school. When she got in touch with her mother she began to tell her we were bad people. She deteriorated. She would skip school. Her mother had intervened into her life. So we lost control at that point because she wanted to be in mom's company.

She spoke of the struggle to separate her grandchildren from the parents despite the mandate from the state for children under the supervision of CPS. "I had to divorce my daughter and granddaughter." She said this was necessary when their behaviors negatively impacted her granddaughter and great granddaughter. With her great-granddaughter, she stated, "I did not allow her in the presence of her mother even though when I got guardianship of her the mother was to be in her life" [according to CPS guidelines]. She said this was a necessary decision because her granddaughter, the mother, kept getting into trouble. "I divorced my granddaughter in the past eight years because I was getting older."

The Industrious grandmother spoke of having to stop her granddaughter from getting off the bus afterschool to see her dad because she felt the interaction was negatively impacting her at school.

I think she would daydream about her parents getting back together. And for that reason, I don't think she really applied herself at school the way she could have because all she was waiting to do was to get on the bus and get off at her grandmother's house to see her daddy. She felt that she could get them back together. In the morning she was going to school looking forward to getting off at



that house in the afternoon. Which was really hard for her as a child.

The Industrious grandmother also told of a time when her grandson's mother offered him alcohol when he was spending time with her away from her care and custody.

I did not want him to spend as much time with his mom as he desired because I knew it wasn't good for him. I had some difficult decisions, because even though he did not live with her, she was still his mother and there were times when no matter what children love their mother. There were times when she wanted him to come around her and I did not feel that it was good. He accepted that she was not good for him and the things she was doing were not good for him. She once offered him alcohol.

All four grandmothers spoke of the confusion for their grandchildren when the rules and expectations at home with them were a stark contrast to behaviors the grandchildren witnessed with their parents. Because of the contrasting principles and behaviors, they all felt consistency in limiting or eliminating the interactions with parents was vital to their successful acts of grandmothering.

### **Commitment to the Needs of the Grandchildren Over all Else**

Commitment is described as dedication to a cause or activity. Each grandmother in this study told of the importance of being dedicated and committed to their act of grandmothering over all else. Despite the sacrifices, oppositions of others, and regardless of changes that resulted in their personal or professional lives, all four grandmothers emphasized the importance of remaining committed to doing what was right for their

grandchildren.

The Compassionate grandmother was very adamant about carrying out the expectations of her grandparents. “If the need arises, raise your own grandchildren, even if you don’t want to.” Although the parents opposed the children being placed in her custody, she did not let that to deter her commitment to give her grandchildren a better life. She even put her well thought out travel plans on hold to take care of her grandchildren as opposed to seeing them placed in the care and custody of CPS.

I was getting ready to go on vacation. Me and my cousin had plans. I was getting ready to go to Louisiana, from Louisiana I was going to Florida, from Florida I was going to New York. You know, what I say is Lord help me to stay here for another 20 years and I can travel after they all finish high school. I will travel when they are in college. I have to make sure they are alright first before I go anywhere else.

She stated raising her grandchildren made her life better. “Now it seems like I have more to live for, to make sure they have a better life.”

The Steadfast grandmother risked the relationship with her daughter in lieu of allowing her granddaughter to live in an unstable negative environment. She told that even though her daughter felt that she took the child from her, she did not see it that way and she did not care what her daughter’s thoughts were about the decision.

When my daughter got ready to move out, she was moving into an apartment and I just didn’t feel comfortable with the crowd she was associating with. I suspected she was dabbling in drugs. I felt like this was not an environment that I

wanted this baby to be in. And so I put my foot down and said, ‘you can go, but she is not going.’ I found out later she resented that all this time. Her mother felt like I took her from her. And maybe I did. I didn’t see it that way. I just felt like I was looking out for the child.

Although her daughter did not express her resentment until years later, the Steadfast grandmother stated, “I did not care. It did not bother me.” Not only did she risk the relationship with her daughter, but she also spoke of having to stand her ground with her jealous son, who thought her granddaughter, his niece, did not deserve the same treatment and privileges the Steadfast grandmother bestowed on her children. She adamantly told him her granddaughter had the same rights and privileges as all of her children.

Similarly, the Activist grandmother’s commitment to her grandchildren can be seen in her decision to not only make sure her grandchildren were in a safe and stable environment, but she continues today to help other grandmothers who are raising grandchildren through a non-profit organization she founded. “I formed my own organization after raising these kids. I worked, I called, talked to people all over the United States about problems of this nature” Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren connects her with other grandparents, mostly grandmothers, who are unexpectedly called upon to care for their grandchildren all across the United States. She works with all nationalities and families experiencing myriad problems around their decision to parent their grandchildren.

Like the Steadfast grandmother, the Activist also made the decision to forego her

relationship with her daughter and granddaughter to protect her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. “I had to divorce my daughter.” She also stated, “I divorced my granddaughter.” Her unyielding commitment to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren can be heard in her statement, “I am not one to tolerate disobedience. I don’t care how old you are. I am not going to tolerate that.” So when her granddaughter became unruly, she allowed her to stay in a juvenile detention center “for the experience.” She believes the experience, “gave her insight” about how good things were at home with Grandma.

The Industrious grandmother told of the many years of marital problems around her decision to parent her granddaughter. Although her husband vehemently objected to her decision, she risked her relationship with her husband and stayed committed to her decision to parent her granddaughter. She knew her granddaughter needed her and she stood by her decision despite the constant “conversations” for her to do otherwise. Her commitment to her granddaughter took precedence. She stated, “She was not welcomed, he did not want me to keep her and I did that against his will.” When she did not agree with her husband’s wish, she stated, “I did not do it. No matter what he did, I had to live the life of a Christian no matter what he did. I still obeyed God rather than him.” Her resolute commitment was heard when she stated, “I was determined I was not going to send her away.” Although her relationship with her husband was strained, she was committed to her granddaughter over all else.

Although not contended by all grandmothers, other themes emerged that were significant to this study. Two of the grandmothers spoke of re-doing missed

opportunities from parenting their own children. Two of the four grandmothers spoke of their positive experience grandmothering with the support of a biological grandfather present. While one grandmother spoke of grandmothering one grandchild with the positive support of the biological grandfather present. However, the same grandmother spoke of raising another grandchild with the same husband, but he who was the step-grandfather of her other grandchild. The non-biological relationship resulted in a polar opposite experience for both she and her granddaughter.

### **A Re-Do**

Both Steadfast and Industrious spoke of the opportunity to redo things through grandmothering. Steadfast spoke of redoing motherhood.

I've tried to give her the things that she wanted. I think about the canopy bed she wanted. And I mean I went all out then and decorated that bedroom the way she wanted. I will never forget taking her to charm class. Just little things and I guess because I was so young when I had my children, I never had a chance to do these things. This was my opportunity for me to relive or redo things that I had not done with her mom. And so, I guess that was me reliving motherhood and it paid off because she was a very happy child.

Industrious voiced similar sentiments of redoing her own younger years when she failed to set goals for herself. She stated, "I did not understand how to set goals for myself. I limited myself and I did not do as well as I could have and I did not want the same thing for my grandchildren." Her aspiration to redo her "mistakes" through her grandchildren was also evident when she stated, "I got pregnant early in life and that was

a bad decision, but I had limited myself and that caused me to struggle. I did not want them to make the same mistakes. I pushed academics and goal setting.” Although she did not pursue her plan to go to the military or college, she saw these goals fulfilled in her grandchildren.

### **Biological Versus Non-Biological Grandfather Presence**

Another theme that emerged was grandmothering with the biological grandfather’s support as voiced by Steadfast, Activist, and Industrious. Steadfast spoke of her husband, the biological grandfather of her granddaughter, supporting her firm decision to raise their granddaughter when her mother move out of the home. She said, “My husband agreed with me. He was very supportive in taking care of this child and making sure everything she needed was there for her.”

Similarly, Activist stated her husband, the biological grandfather to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, was very supportive. Because of his support, she got to travel, despite grandmothering her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This support came through in her statement, “When my husband was alive, I got to travel. He would babysit.” While raising her grandson, Industrious stated, “My husband thought he hung the moon. He was willing to do anything for him.”

Conversely, Industrious conveyed a polar opposite experience when raising her granddaughter, with the same husband, the non-biological grandfather to her granddaughter. She experienced a lack of support, even obstinacy from her husband, while grandmothering her granddaughter. She stated:

She was not my husband’s biological grandchild. She was step, so that presented

a problem too because she was not his biological grandchild and that made a big difference as my grandson was his biological grandchild. He felt that her parents should be the ones taking care of her.

Industrious spoke further of the obstinacy of her husband regarding grandmothering her granddaughter. “He did not want me to buy anything for her. He did not give her money. He just was not nice to her.” Although grandmothering in the same household, with the same husband, albeit decades apart, Industrious lived two opposing experiences due to the biological and non-biological factor.

### **Summary**

Each grandmother’s lived experience revealed either divorce, drug abuse, disease, delivery, or detention as negative life events and factors leading to their decision to grandmother their grandchildren. This finding is consistent with literature identifying “nine D’s” as root causes participating their new living arrangement. Edwards and Ray (2010), noted the new family formation is a function of negative life events, including, divorce, desertion, drugs, death, diseases, delivery (teen birth), detention, deployment, and departure.

The Compassionate grandmother revealed drug abuse and divorce as precipitating factors in her narrative. The Steadfast grandmother discussed delivery (teen birth) and drug abuse in her narrative. The Activist grandmother detailed disease (bipolar disorder), delivery, drugs, and detention. While the Industrious grandmother revealed divorce and drug abuse in her narrative.

Each participant included in this study expressed a strong parental influence

impacted their personal decision to parent their grandchildren and ultimately resulted in their grandchildren successfully navigating through the negative life experiences that caused them to be in their care. Although there was variance amongst the four participants in terms of the structure of their family unit, foundations of love and care were the backdrops for their own individual lives as children. Each articulated a strong faith in God and fervent prayer were instilled in them early in life and were conduits to help both them and their grandchildren during the difficult times when the interactions with their parents presented a conflict between the opposing values that existed and the negative actions of their parents. The commitment to focus on the needs of their grandchildren in the face of interferences and obstacles propelled the grandmothers in this study to persevere.

It has been said, it takes a village to raise a child. If that statement is true then the grandmothers in this study were the village leaders who helped shape and change the narratives of their grandchildren from the downward trajectory set forth by the negative life experiences of their parents. The participants, in their own distinctive way, voiced that raising their grandchildren was the right thing to do and had it not been for their intervening in the lives of their grandchildren, their grandchildren's lives may have taken a very different path.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This purpose of this study is to hear the voices, lived experiences, and parenting practices of four African American grandmothers who raised academically successful grandchildren in one urban school district. The quantity of specific studies regarding African American grandmothers raising grandchildren is limited, and this study is intended to expand the voices of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren, inform African American grandmothers who might be called upon to raise their grandchildren, as well as encourage African American grandmothers who are currently raising grandchildren who are students.

#### **Summary**

In my effort to understand and interpret the lived experiences and grandmothering practices of four African American grandmothers, I began with these research questions as guides:

- 1) How do African American grandmothers describe their personal attributes related to their grandmothering?
- 2) How do African American grandmothers exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering?
- 3) How do African American grandmothers describe their perceptions about grandmothering to support student academic achievement?

One of the greatest challenges for grandmothers raising grandchildren, is to maintain a stable environment and high expectations for their grandchildren under their

care. This finding is consistent with previous research which avows the role of a grandmother raising grandchildren requires them to forego the love them and leave them relationship of grandparents not acting as parents to take over the role of parent and disciplinarian (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002) This role also requires grandmothers to work closely with teachers, counselors, and administrators to communicate their high expectations and clear focus of their grandchildren's successful navigation through all school settings to graduate high school. In my experience as a school leader, I agree grandmothers who establish high expectations at home and communicate those expectations to school personnel experience academic success in their grandchildren. I witnessed the realization of high expectations in my niece and nephews as my mother maintained and communicated her high expectations throughout their entire lives.

Grandmothers today are perceived differently than they were in times past. The four participants in this study detailed active and vibrant lives. This is consistent with research emphasizing grandmothers are younger, live longer, and have healthier lives (Aldous, 1995). The Compassionate grandmother was 30 years old when she first began raising grandchildren and she was 60 years old at the time of our interview. The Steadfast grandmother was 34 years old when she began raising her granddaughter, and to her own sentiment stated she was "too young to be a grandmother." She was 80 years old at the time of our interview. The Activist and Industrious grandmothers were 42 and 38 years old respectively when they began raising grandchildren. At the time of our interviews, the Activist grandmother stated she was a "senior citizen" and the Industrious grandmother was 80 years old at the time. Each African American grandmother

expressed active lives engaging in fun activities with their peers and their grandchildren. Unlike the frail, old fashioned, and out of touch persona associated with grandmothers of the past. This finding is supported by literature indicating most grandmothers are not members of the elderly population (Simon-Rusinowitz & Krach, 1996; Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003; and Aldous, 1995)

The guiding questions served as a central focus of the research. First, personal attributes relating to African American grandmothers raising grandchildren. Second, how African American grandmother exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering. Finally, perceptions about grandmothering as described by the participants in the study in regards to supporting the successful academic achievement of their grandchildren attending school in one urban school district. Additionally, Womanist Theory provided a lens for a discussion about grandmothers raising academically successful grandchildren. The major themes included: (1) strong parental influence in their own lives; (2) a strong spiritual influence; (3) limited interactions between grandchild and absent parent; and (4) a commitment to the needs of their grandchildren over all else. Additional themes also emerges. They included: (1) a do-over or re-do and (2) grandmothering with the biological grandfather present versus a non-biological grandfather.

### **African American Grandmother's Personal Attributes**

The first research question posed investigated, "How African American grandmothers described their personal attributes related to their grandmothering?" Although each participant had varying backgrounds, primarily due to the differing life experiences leading to their unexpected living arrangement, common personal attributes

emerged in their stories. Common across three of the four participants was the unconditional love and nurturing nature each grandmother exhibited towards their grandchildren.

The Compassionate grandmother expressed love for her grandchildren and contended it was vital to their adjustment to the new living arrangement because they were confused after being taken one place to live, then another place to live, before finally settling in her care. She expressed, “They didn’t understand why they were not loved enough for their parents to keep them.” She continued, “Because a lot of time when children grow up like that they feel nobody wants them, so they don’t want to be anything because they figure nobody cares about them.” She stated, “So you have to show them that love.” She expressed modeling her love for her grandchildren after “the special love” shown her by her own grandparents. The Steadfast grandmother expressed, “I think it is important to show love.” She added, “Stay steadfast in what you believe is right and necessary for them to be successful and for them to be happy.” Like the Compassionate grandmother, she expressed it is important to nurture them and let them know they are loved and wanted. She said her granddaughter “often remarked about what a wonderful childhood she had.” The Industrious grandmother expressed letting them know you love them is the most important personal attribute for successfully grandmothering grandchildren. “Number one, you have to let them know you love them, but you also need to be consistent.” As an aunt and sometimes surrogate mother, I recall always telling my niece and nephews “I love you” every time we were together. This was important to me because I remember not hearing those words told to me as much as I

wanted to as a child. I felt obligated to make sure they heard it as much as possible to compensate for their absent parents.

This finding is consistent with literature which affirms a loving and caring bond between grandmothers and their grandchildren increases the likelihood that the grandchild will make healthy life choices. Grandmothers unexpectedly called upon to care for their grandchildren exhibit a passion to provide stability, structure and unconditional love for their grandchildren who have experienced a negative life event and as a result lacked the stability and unconditional love from their parent(s). This strong bond between grandmother and grandchild benefits the entire family (Silverstein, 2007; Marx & Solomon, 2000; and Wright 2009).

Faith in God was expressed by all participants as an essential attribute as they raised their grandchildren. The Compassionate grandmother articulated, “God is in control.” Before making the decision to raise her grandchildren, she told a CPS worker, “Let me pray about it.” After making the decision to care for them, she stated, “God is the blessing for me to be here to take them.” She stated it was an easy decision because, “God already knew what I was going to do before I did it.”

Similarly, the Steadfast grandmother addressed her faith in God as a fundamental reason for her decision to raise her granddaughter.

I felt that I needed to keep this child in an environment that would be conducive to good living, right living, and spiritual living. I just didn’t see that happening with her moving in with her mom. I wanted to be sure that she was in a safe environment as well as a spiritual environment.

The Activist grandmother voiced her positive demeanor while grandmothering was a result of deep faith and belief that God. She expressed, “God made each individual with the mindset you can do whatever you want to do and be successful. God has put it there and we are Christians and we believe that deeply.” She relied on her faith in God for insight. “I would pray and then I’d wait a while before I made an action.” She further stated, “...everything is to put God first, that’s the beginning. Good morning. Good evening, let’s put God first.” She expressed these sentiments are the focus for all conversations with her family. Considering the difficult and untimely deaths of her daughter and granddaughter, the Activist grandmother relied on her spiritual foundation to get her through difficult times that others might have succumbed to.

The Industrious grandmother expressed her faith in God was also the foundation for decision to grandmother. “I wanted to make sure they had Christian principals instilled in them.” She also relied on her faith in God as she raised her granddaughter against her husband’s will. “I knew that whatever I did I needed the help of God. So I always solicited pray from Him to help me through whatever it was.” I recall the years of struggle and added tension around the house as my parents argued almost daily because of her decision to raise my niece. I was very angry for many years because I felt life would be better for everyone if either my mother or my step-father left the marriage. It was difficult for me as her aunt to hear the constant arguing, and I knew it was much harder for my niece, the object of most conversations during that time. For this reason, my step-father and I did not have a relationship until much later in life when I could forgive him and my mother for what my niece had to endure. It was the faith in God my

mother taught me as child that allowed me to forgive.

Living a life grounded in faith in God was a key personal attribute of all four participants as they navigated through their lives raising their grandchildren. This finding is consistent with the tenet of Womanist Theory asserting spirituality along with cultural values and behaviors are paramount in shaping the identity of African American women (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Womanist thought further declares the connection of humanity to the spiritual realm is a foundational speaking position of African American women addressing everyday problems. This is heard in the healing and restorative voices of all four participants (Phillips & McCaskill (1995). Each grandmother attributed their resilience to their faith in God to help them throughout their lives and their grandmothereing. African American grandmothers are known to forge forward confidently regardless of the negative events and perceptions of others in an effort to give their grandchildren a foundation of hope and possibilities (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; and Thomas, 1998).

The caretaking culture of African ethos reveres grandmothers as the pillar of strength and as religious leaders embodying resilience and important significance to both family and community. African American grandmothers traditionally reinforced and reemphasized the role of religion as matriarchs of the family (Foster, 1983; Genovese, 1976; and Ruiz and Zhu, 2004). In my professional and personal experiences, grandmothers freely include love and faith in God in discussions relating to their roles as parent and in addressing the everyday encounters of school and life. I have personally taken note of the number of African American mothers and grandmothers sitting in

church pews on Sunday morning. In my experience, the number of mothers and grandmothers greatly out-weighs the number of fathers and grandfathers attending formal Sunday worship service.

### **Acts of Grandmothering**

This section describes the many acts of grandmothering shared by the participants that were key factors in their role as parent to their grandchildren. All four grandmothers in this study expressed their acts of grandmothering rooted in instilling work ethic, accountability, and hope in their grandchildren as they exercised their role as a grandmother raising grandchildren. Work ethic was expressed by the Compassionate grandmother as a daily routine and expectation at home and school. “My grandchildren have a chore. We have chore charts on the refrigerator door. Everybody has a chore.” As taught by her grandmother, she said, “It shows that they have to work for what they want in life. They’re not a handout.” She wants to teach them “how to be independent.”

Both the Activist and Industrious grandmothers taught their grandchildren that hard work pays off. Activist expressed to her grandchildren, “If you want to be something in life, get on the ball and find out for yourself. Life is not fair. There is no such thing.” Industrious stated, “I pushed setting goals and focusing on your own interests.” She enrolled her grandson in Taekwondo to further teach the tenet of work ethic. “He was a black belt. They had standards for discipline and hard work.” He worked to earn a second-degree black belt while in junior high school.

Grandmothers also expressed instilling hope and a sense of wellbeing as an important act of grandmothering for their grandchildren to counteract the personal



struggles they witnessed with their parents. Hope was voiced by three of the four participants. Hope was expressed by the Compassionate grandmother as she taught her grandchildren, “School is for you to better yourself. I hope it teaches them that they can be proud of who they are. Don’t look back where you came from. Just look ahead at what you can be.” Activist stressed hope to her grandchildren when she said, “You are not who your parents are.” Industrious echoed the sentiment of instilling hope in her grandchildren. She expressed, “You are not better than anybody, but you are just as good as anybody!” These findings are consistent with literature detailing how grandmothers have passionately provided the structure missing from the lives of their grandchildren. In the role as matriarch, African American grandmothers have also traditionally reinforced family values, the role of religion, self-respect, hard work, and a life of discipline. African American grandmothers have been the moral support for their families for generations. (Marx and Solomon, 2000; Cuddenback, 2004; Barber, 2010; and Ruiz and Zhu, 2004).

This finding is further consistent with literature contending after Reconstruction, poverty shaped lived experiences of African American grandmothers in the South. In the plantation fields of the Antebellum South, African American grandmothers held a central role of respect and hope by their significance in their fluid roles of parenting children orphaned by slavery. These assertions are supported in the autobiographies of well known African American such as Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou as they all detailed the hope, internal will, and perseverance to overcome obstacles instilled in them by their grandmothers (Jimenez, 2002; and Gutman, 1976).

As a child, I remember my mother's words, "You are not better than anybody, but you are just as good as anybody!" That was the guiding force for me to persevere when my high school guidance counselor told me I was not college material. Her advice was for me to pursue trade school instead. My belief in that mantra is why I am doing this research study. She instilled the same hope and work ethic in my niece and nephews.

A finding expressed by the Industrious grandmother that was not expressed by the other participants was seeking professional counseling outside of the school setting for her grandchildren to address their emotional needs. She further expressed she also sought professional counseling for herself to address her emotional needs associated with her decision to raise her grandchildren. This finding is consistent with a national study by Minkler, Fuller-Thompson, and Driver (1992) which found grandmothers raising grandchildren are twice as likely to experience clinical depression compared to grandmothers in the traditional role of grandmother. This finding is also consistent with Edwards' (2018) assertion that grandmothers may benefit from professional help as they raise grandchildren who have suffered as their parents experienced negative life events. This study supports Industrious' decision to attend to not only her grandchildren's emotional needs, but her own emotional needs as well. In my personal and professional experiences, many African Americans do not seek the guidance and counsel of professionals to attend to their emotional wellness. I have heard many African American mothers and grandmothers tell their children and grandchildren, "What happens in our house stays in our house. It is no one else's business." However, I have seen an increase in parents asking for assistance from school counseling to those seeking information on

resources available outside of the school setting.

A second chance was another finding as expressed by two of the four participants. Steadfast expressed her act of grandmothering as an opportunity to redo things. She stated, “I was so young when I had my children and never had a chance to do these things. And so I guess that was an opportunity for me... to re-live or re-do things that I had not done with her mom.” Industrious expressed an opportunity to re-do things she had not done in her own life. “I limited myself and I did not do as well as I could have and I did not want them to do the same things. I got pregnant early in life and I limited myself by being a parent. I wanted to go to the military or get a college degree.” She continued, “I did not know how to set goals for myself. I had to learn on my own.” As a result, she wanted to make sure her grandchildren knew how to set goals.

This finding is consistent with literature by Whitley, Kelley and Sipe (2001) in their assertion that grandparents raising grandchildren were found to experience positive outcomes including a second chance to do things right and many reported increased feelings of usefulness and purpose. This feeling of usefulness and purpose was expressed in Compassionate’s statement, “Now it seems like I have more to live for.” She expressed a desire to make a better life for her grandchildren under her care.

Attending worship with their grandchildren was voiced by three of the four participants as an act of grandmothering that sustained them over time. The Compassionate grandmother stated, “Put them in church. Please, please put them in church. A lot of people say they don’t want to put them in church, but they need to put them in church. When we go to church, we put [their parents] on the prayer list.” The Steadfast

grandmother stated, “Attending service, going to bible classes, and such I was able to learn a lot of things that were necessary. I think being able to follow that path or direction was one of the things that I felt like made her strong.” The Industrious grandmother stated, “Church attendance was important. Behavior was very important. Christianity was always very important because if you lived here you went to church. They were involved in activities with the youth department.” This act of grandmothering was voiced as a means of instilling good principles and respect in their grandchildren. I agree with this finding. I witnessed my mother constantly enrolling my niece and nephews in activities that put them in the presence of other children and adults who shared their same values and morals. They all attended at least 2 Christian camps each summer. This exposed them to children from around the United States and also exposed them to college as the camps were held on prestigious colleges and universities. This finding is consistent with literature stressing Womanist Theory as a salient praxis by which African American women mother children, navigate relationships, interact with power sources, and shape children into productive citizens. Further literature contend hearing these once hushed voices are conduits to the healing and restoration of balance between mankind and nature that will reconnect humanity to the spirit realm as a means of solving everyday problems. (Abdullah, 2012; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; and Thomas, 1998).

Due to the differing parent styles of grandmother and parent, limiting or eliminating the interactions between the grandchildren and their parent(s) experiencing personal struggles was another finding of this study. This act was vehemently expressed

by all four participants as a key aspect of successfully grandmothering. The Compassionate grandmother voiced, “It really was one of the hardest things for me. It really was not for me, it was for them. For the parents to stay away from them because it was hard for them to go by my rules and what their parents were doing.” The inconsistency caused confusion in her grandchildren. The Steadfast grandmother expressed, “I did not like the crowd she was associating herself with and I felt like this was not the environment that I wanted this baby to be in.” The Activist grandmother was the most outspoken participant in regards to this topic. She adamantly expressed, “I had to divorce my daughter and granddaughter.” Despite the sentiments of CPS, she felt the interactions with parents “caused more harm than good for the grandchildren” and disrupted the stable environment she had established. She recalled, “We lost control” after her granddaughter began interacting with her mother without her consent. With her great-granddaughter, she said, “I did not allow her in the presence of her mother.” Similarly, the Industrious grandmother expressed she had to “stop her granddaughter from getting off the school bus at her dad’s house.” With her oldest grandson she stated, “There were times when she wanted him to come around her. It created an issue because she did not have his best interest at heart.” She stated her grandson stop interacting with his mother after he reported to her that during a visit, his mother offered him alcohol.

As aunt and school leader, I have seen first-hand the confusion caused when my niece and nephews and my students return from the weekend after spending time with their absent parent. Many times they return angry and frustrated as they adjusted to the parenting and practices at grandma’s house. This anger and frustration can be seen in

their interactions with peers and teachers. This finding is consistent with literature stressing the significant difference in parenting styles can cause great confusion and stress between the grandmother and grandchildren (Edwards & Ray, 2010; Dolbin-MacNab, 2016; Ross and Aday, 2006; and Strom & Strom, 2011).

New to literature was the finding of grandmothering as a mother as expressed by all four participants in this study. The Compassionate grandmother stated “I am the parent.” She further stated she was the only parent her grandchildren knew because their parents were “out of the picture.” As a grandmother raising grandchildren, she had to “teach them everything about life.” Steadfast also stated “I was her parent.” She expressed her difficulty in drawing a line between being a grandmother and being her granddaughter’s parent. The Activist grandmother did not refer to herself a grandmother, but rather said, “I am Mom. I am Mom, bottom line.” Like all other participants, The Industrious grandmother stated, “I was the parent. I was involved with all of that as I was when I was rearing my own children. I didn’t change.” All four participants expressed they carried out their role as a mother not a grandmother while raising their grandchildren. In my opinion, this finding is vital to instilling respect and gratitude in grandchildren raised by grandmothers. In all aspects of parenting, these grandmother have performed the duties and responsibilities of a mother minus, giving birth to their grandchildren. Were it not for their grandmothers many grandchildren would be placed in the care and custody of complete strangers. I agree with the sentiment told to the Compassionate grandmother by her grandmother when she said, “No one will love you like a grandmother.” There is no love like a grandmother’s love.

## **Perceptions to Support Academic Achievement**

Literature reveals classroom environment and the dimension of African American culture are crucial considerations that have a profound impact on student achievement. The cultural capital of African American grandchildren raised by grandmothers must be of importance to educators as grandchildren navigate their new living arrangement, interact, and participate successfully in school settings. Educators must balance dimensions of culture with activities, communication, and structure when interacting with students and the grandmothers charged with their care. (Ellison, Boykin, Towns, & Stokes, 2000).

Each participant in this study expressed the establishment of high academic expectations, monitoring usage of technology, and ongoing interactions with school to support the academic achievement of their grandchildren. The Compassionate grandmother expressed, “Three days a week we have reading and writing, then one day a week we have math. I told them I do not accept Cs and Ds on report cards. I am not accepting excuses.” The Steadfast grandmother stated, “We are very strong academic people.” The Activist stated, “We study in my household. So I am a learner when they are learning. They were all academically brilliant kids.” The Industrious grandmother stated, “I had high expectations and the family did also. We all had high expectations and they graduated.”

I agree with this finding. In my experience, students raised by grandmothers are more likely to experience academic and social success at school when high expectations

have been established and communicated to educators. Literature consistent with this finding details how grandmothers raising grandchildren believe education is a means to a productive life (Gibson, 2005). They also form caregiver connections that fosters greater academic achievement and positive interactions with teachers and peers (Belsky & Fearon, 2002).

In addition to setting high expectations, this study revealed three of the four participants voiced monitoring their grandchildren's use of technology. The Compassionate grandmother stated, "I have to take away tablets. I have to take away phones and let them use their minds instead of their fingers." The Activist grandmother stated, "I control computer usage." The Industrious grandmother expressed, "There are times when the phone had to be taken away. They might may not be allowed to watch TV. Some privileges were revoked." I agree with this finding. In my experience personally with my nephew and professionally with students, one of the first privileges grandmothers revoked when expectations were not met regarding academics or behavior was usage of technology, specifically video games and smart phones. Children today are more connected with technology than they are with people, including their families. The time spent on technology takes away for time spent on school work and family time. This finding is not aligned with literature attesting grandmothers are not familiar with children's interest such as video games, computers, and other similar activities (Edwards & Sweeney, 2007).

Ongoing interactions with school was also a finding expressed by all four participants. The Compassionate grandmother stated, "I go to school to see what is going



on. I even check on grades and make sure they are doing right about school. I go through their backpacks.” As an educator, the Steadfast grandmother stated, “I made sure she had strong teachers. I was in the school system, so I knew what to look for.” The Activist grandmother stated, “I am adamant about being on that campus.” She stated she constantly interacts with “principals and teachers.” The Industrious grandmother stated, “I was involved with activities at school the same as when I was rearing my own children. I stayed involved in their homework and with teachers. They knew who I was. They knew they could call me for anything.” I agree with this finding. In my experience, grandmothers who make their presence known at school have an opportunity to develop a partnership with the school and teachers to ensure their grandchildren are on the right path academically, behaviorally, and socially. This finding is consistent with literature in asserting the disruptions in the life of grandchildren raised by grandmothers can lessen their ability to relate in school. When grandmothers intervene for their grandchildren it is invaluable for their well-being (Williams, 2001; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007).

Negative perceptions of grandmother’s ability to raise successful grandchildren was a finding expressed by both the Compassionate and the Activist grandmothers. They expressed great concern regarding their perceptions that society and school personnel often have negative views of African American grandmothers and the grandchildren under their care. The Compassionate grandmother stated:

We don’t get the credit that we deserve. That’s the problem. We don’t get the credit that we deserve raising our grandkids. African Americans, we don’t get great credit from society, period. Society sees us and our children in jail or

selling drugs. They don't see our children as doctors and lawyers and stuff like that. That's sad, that's real sad. That's why a lot of grandchildren give up because people don't see them as successful.

This finding was echoed by the Activist grandmother. She stated:

Schools did not respect the fact that the parents were not in the picture. It is hard for grandparents to interact with schools because they don't want use there and it hurts the children. Most of them think that the grandparents are older and don't have any education, which is a lie. They think our grandchildren are sleeping on mattresses with not enough food. Grandmothers raising grandchildren is not a local thing or a race thing, this is a universal problem.

I agree with this finding. In my personal and professional experiences, educators often have preconceived perceptions of African American grandchildren raised by grandmothers. I am reminded of a time when my nephew was in elementary school and returned to school after Spring Break. His teacher knew he was being raised by his grandparents. When the teacher asked all the students to tell what they did over Spring Break, she did not believe him when he told her he went to Hawaii. He was so upset that he begged my mother to allow him to take pictures taken on the vacation to school to prove he went to Hawaii for Spring Break. This upset my mother when the teacher called her to report my nephew was misbehaving in class. Never having behavior issues at school, my mother informed her that he was upset and frustrated because she did not believe he had gone to Hawaii.

This finding of negative perceptions of grandmothers raising grandchildren is

consistent with literature claiming the financial burdens of grandmothering causes grandchildren to forego things other than necessities. Age, health issues, and a lack of energy and knowledge of school setting are contented as factors making it difficult for grandmothers to interact with grandchildren and teachers (Edwards, 2018; Guastafarro, Guastafarro, Katelyn, & Stuart, 2015; Williams, 2011). The grandmothers in this study experienced realities that eradicate these negative perceptions.

The Activist grandmother expressed her first granddaughter and her 13 year old great-grandson, who now lives with her, both suffered behavioral issues that impacted them in school. She stated her first granddaughter became “out of control” while trying to fit in with her peers. She also referred to her great-grandson as “a terror” as he attempted to fit in with others at school. She stated, “He was sent to an alternative school” in the district when he was not successful at his home campus due to his behavior. However, she stated her granddaughter eventually made a turn-around while in her care. This finding was not voiced by the other three grandmothers in this study.

In my experience some grandchildren who have experienced the negative events of their parents often experience difficulties in school. I am often introduced to grandmothers in parent conferences after their grandchildren have been removed from class. I find most of these grandchildren have not been in the care and custody of their grandmothers their entire lives. Rather, many have lived with their grandmothers intermittently or came to live with her later in life. As with the grandmothers in this study, the grandchildren who were in their care and custody the majority of their lives, with limited or no interactions during their parent’s negative life events, had positive

school experiences without behavioral concerns. This finding is consistent with literature espousing children raised by grandmothers exhibit a better sense of well-being than those raised by parents experiencing personal struggles (Harper, Hardesty, & Woody, 2001; Whitley, Kelly, & Kelly, 2001; Williams, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

While there is no overall formula for success for grandmothers raising grandchildren, their personal attributes, interpretation of their acts of grandmothering, and their perceptions to support their grandchildren identified by the participants of this study offers a foundation and a structure to establish a path for academic success for the grandchildren under their care. Success is not a given result, but rather a function of intentional actions. The African American grandmothers involved in this study all told analogous stories with particular elements of their success depicted virtually the same in spite of the varying negative life events which led to their living arrangement, varying family structure, and the variance in the age of the grandmothers when they began raising their grandchildren.

The African American grandmothers in this study, each expressed relatively healthy and fulfilling lives without the financial strains and limited resources in relation to many grandmothers raising grandchildren in this country (Guastaferro, Guastaferro, Katelyn and Stuart, 2015). One purpose for engaging in this research was to identify the attributes and values of African American grandmothers unexpectedly called upon to raise their grandchildren enrolled in one urban school district, how they exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering, and their perceptions about supporting the

academic achievement of their grandchildren. Throughout this study, I found that the grandmothers exercised their position in the world created by God as individuals, created in God's image, and through their acts of caring and resiliency as a means of raising grandchildren to navigate among people, nature, and the spiritual realm (Thomas, 1998; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; & Abdullah, 2012) to solve everyday problems.

They did not allow the negative life events their children experienced to define their grandmothering practices or the path selected for their grandchildren; rather they instilled pride and accountability in their grandchildren by devoting their lives to providing a safe environment, with high expectations, and a spiritual foundation focused on the importance of God first. Each understood and valued the importance of showing unconditional love, parenting as a parent and not a grandmother, and paramount to all else, focusing on the needs of their grandchildren. The grandmothers expressed their decision to raise their grandchildren was the right thing to do and as a result experienced positive outcomes and increased feelings of usefulness and purpose in their role (Whitley, Kelley, & Sipe, 2001).

The stories of each grandmother clearly expressed that a main priority was to limit or eliminate the interactions between the parents and the grandchildren because of the confusion presented by the differing values and expectations. Through my experiences as an aunt and occasional surrogate parent to my niece and nephews and educator, I have firsthand knowledge of the confusion and difficulty experienced by children when parents come in and out of their lives while in the care of their grandmothers. Although they desire to be in the presence of their parents and long for

their love, the interactions are often observed Monday morning when it is time to get back to the routines of grandmother's house and school. I can't count the number of times I called home to find out, a student spent time with an absent parent over the weekend prior to acting out in class.

The passion of each grandmother was evident throughout the interviews as they expressed not only their faith in God, but their belief that their grandchildren would overcome all odds and have a "better" life through successfully navigating in school and out of school settings. The parental examples set forth in their own individual childhood set the foundation for excellence conveyed to their grandchildren. The stories shared by the grandmothers left a lasting impression on me as an educator and a person with a strong faith in God. As an educator and administrator, I begin each day by telling to my students I believe in their ability to make good academic and personal decisions. As I engage in interviewing potential staff members, I always express my expectation that students will be treated with the same care and compassion they would want for my own child. I also express to both parents and staff that when I go to bed at night, I have a clear conscience because I make every effort to do right by students because I answer to a power higher than man, God.

Each story shared by each grandmother left me feeling inspired by their personal troubles and triumphs as they described their experience as a grandmother raising grandchildren. Although I was inspired by all participants, I was deeply touched by the strength and tenacity of the Activist grandmother when she shared the horrible story of the brutal and inhuman murder of her daughter who suffered from mental illness.

Despite the personal tragedies, the Activist not only advocates for her grandchildren, but she provides support and advocates for other grandmothers raising grandchildren.

Successfully parenting grandchildren employs a Womanist framework to create a space that honors African American grandmothers raising grandchildren as agents of knowledge as they carry out their acts of grandmothering involving an “ethic of caring” and personal responsibility to family and community (Banks-Wallace, 2000). These grandmothers focused on spirituality and cultural values to guide their grandchildren successfully through the personal events that occurred to change their living arrangements. Womanist thought empowers grandmothers raising grandchildren to address solving everyday problems from a position of power (Thomas, 1998). Therefore, intentionally transmitting empowerment from one generation to the next. By doing so, they are able to navigate relationships, interact with power sources, and shape children into productive citizens (Abdullah, 2012). In each grandmothers’ story, I found that their womanist persona was guided and shaped by other influences that began early in their upbringing and materialized throughout their practice of parenting grandchildren.

Casper and Bryson (1998) cited five family arrangements of grand-parent headed household, and I saw variations of the five arrangements in the stories told by the participants in this study. My personal connection and firsthand knowledge of my own mother’s experience raising one grandchild without the support of my step-father and non-biological grandfather to my niece was a testament to her strength to push through during the years of marital woe and angst. On the contrary, I also have firsthand knowledge of the positive support from my same step-father and biological grandfather

while she was raising my two nephews. I also have firsthand knowledge of the Steadfast grandmother's experience raising a granddaughter, and heard the story of the Activist grandmother's experience with the support and love of a husband and biological grandfather. All were inspiring and heartwarming.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this research point to several areas in need of further exploration.

1. As the number of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren continues to increase, school districts across the United States should intentionally build capacity through relationships with these grandmothers. This would benefit grandmothers, their grandchildren, and educators as they build a partnership to best serve the needs of students raised by grandmothers. This is of significant importance to expand the perspective of African American grandmothers in this role.
2. Universities, colleges and alternative certification programs providing teacher certificates should inform aspiring educators on the potential family arrangements in student households to expand their perspective and give insight. Further, coach them on acts and behaviors that will best serve students and their care-givers in non-traditional families.
3. Studies specific to African American grandchildren raised by grandmothers in public school settings is needed and would benefit African American grandchildren as they navigate in school and out of school settings. Research should be conducted to give insight from their perspective.



## **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommendations for future research:

1. This study included the voices of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren in one urban school district. While it is not a national study, it would be beneficial to replicate this study to include additional voices from grandmothers across other states.
2. Studies regarding African American grandmothers in the role of parent to their grandchildren in relation to successful academic achievement are limited. Studies specifically focused on the impact the interactions with the absent parent has on the educational and emotional development of these grandchildren would provide insight into this phenomenon.
3. The experience of African American grandmothers in contrast to African American grandfathers raising grandchildren may be helpful in highlighting the experiences of African American grandfathers in this role. This could be helpful in identifying the causative factors of gender in relation to the personal attributes, acts of grandparenting, and perspectives about academic success of grandchildren in their care.
4. Studies specific to the age of grandmothers while raising grandchildren and its impact on grandmothering wisdom could provide additional insight.

As an African American educator, the lived experiences of the four grandmothers included in this study are very enlightening and informative as I work daily with

grandmothers, grandchildren, and the teachers who educate them. These often hushed voices will guide my actions as I prepare new teachers to the profession and returning teachers to work appropriately to enhance the academic achievement of students. Additionally, I am encouraged to intentionally foster a welcoming environment for grandmothers partnering with me to attend to the educational and emotional needs of their grandchildren.

As an educator in an urban school district for the past nineteen years, and being a student in the same school district thirty-six years ago, I have seen the tremendous change in the demographics of the students, teachers, and administrators in the two varying roles over time. Additionally, the political climate of the nation, educational agendas, high stakes testing, and individual biases greatly impacts the work of educators. Educators must work purposefully and intentionally to serve the best interest of students through culturally responsive acts that will enrich the learning experience of students, families and the communities we serve.

Finally, I hope my research study serves as an inspiration to readers to engage in conversations that promote action regarding this topic. It is also my desire to motivate and inform those who hold positions of power to support these grandparents raising grandchildren in an effort to produce successful students who will become productive members of society.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Title:** *Hearing the Voices of African Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren and Their Role in Fostering Academic Achievement*

This is an interview with \_\_\_\_\_ conducted by Andrea D. Cain, PhD candidate at Texas A&M University, Teaching Learning and Culture -Urban Education.

Today is \_\_\_\_\_. The time is \_\_\_\_\_.

This interview is being conducted as a part of a research study “Hearing the Voices of African American Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren and Their Role in Fostering Academic Achievement.”

This is meeting \_\_\_ of this interview.

The purpose of this study is to examine and interpret the life experiences and grandmothering practices of six African American grandmothers raising grandchildren in one urban school district- how they describe their personal characteristics related to success in grandmothering, how they exercise and interpret their acts of grandmothering, and how they describe their influence or impact of their academic achievement.

To begin this interview, I would like to start with some information related to you.

#### Personal Information

1. Tell me something about yourself.
2. Tell me something about your family.

3. How old were you when your grandchild first came to live with you?
4. Describe your personal educational experience.

#### Specific Questions Regarding Grandmothering

1. How old was your grandchild when he/she first began to live with you?
2. What do you feel are some of the significant personal qualities, values, and behaviors necessary for grandmothers raising grandchildren?
3. What do you think are some of your strong qualities as a grandmother raising your grandchild?
4. Please share some of the important life experiences that you have had which facilitated your decision to parent your grandchild.
5. What interpersonal dynamics do you feel impacted your effectiveness as a grandmother and parent to your grandchild? (How were you motivated towards becoming parent to your grandchild?)
6. What role, if any, did your upbringing play in the way you parented your grandchild?
7. What values, interests, goals, and beliefs influence the way you parented your grandchild personally and academically?
8. Please describe any obstacles or restrictions that caused you the most concern as you carried out your role as a grandmother parenting a grandchild.
9. How has your personal and professional life been affected by your decision to parent your grandchild?
10. How did you go about establishing a positive learning environment at home to support your grandchild's education?

#### Interpreting the Act of Grandmothering

1. Describe your role as a grandmother and a parent to your grandchild.
2. Please describe some of the approaches/techniques you used in gaining insight into the needs of your grandchild.
3. How does parenting your child differ from parenting your grandchild?
4. From your experience as a grandmother raising grandchildren, name 2-3 key aspects of grandmothering for sustained success over time.

### Impact on Education

1. Describe your role in your grandchild's education.
2. Can you talk about a difficult decision you made as a grandmother parenting and what impact it had on your grandchild's education?
3. What key factors of your grandmothering do you think led to your grandchild's successfully graduating high school?

### Summarization Question

Is there anything I did not ask or that you have not mentioned that you would like to add about yourself, about your experiences, about being an African American grandmother raising grandchildren, and/or about the education of African American grandchildren raised by grandmothers?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (Phone and Email)**

“Hello, my name is Andrea Cain. I am a doctoral student at Texas A&M University and I am conducting a study on African American grandmothers raising grandchildren in urban school districts. In order to get more information about this topic, I would like to interview four African American grandmothers in an urban school district. The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be at a location of your choice. The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

All information gathered during the study will be confidential. I will be the only person with access to your consent form, which links your name with the subject number. Your identity will be disguised through this specific coding. In order to get exact information from you, and increase the strength of the study, you will be audio taped in the 60 to 90 minute interview session

Your name will be pre-coded to the recording tape that will be used to record the interview session. The transcriptions (writing down from the tape what you said) will also be coded in order to further protect your confidentiality. Written reports may entail the use of quoted material. At the conclusion of this study, the information gathered and audio tapes, identifiable only by subject number, will be stored in a locked file that only I will be able to access. The information obtained from this research will be used for the publication or educational purposes of this researcher only and not for any other purpose.

If you agree to talk with me, all information will be kept confidential and you can ask questions or stop at any time during the interview. Understand that if there are any problems or questions in connection with your participation of this study, you may contact Dr. Norvella Carter, the faculty advisor for this project, at Texas A&M University at (979) 845-3211 or [ncarter@tamu.edu](mailto:ncarter@tamu.edu). This research has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participation in this study.

Do you have any further questions?”

## APPENDIX C

### TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION PROGRAM

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#### CONSENT FORM

**Project Title:** Hearing the Voices of African American Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren

**You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Andrea D. Cain, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.**

#### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of this study is to examine and interpret the life experiences and grandmothering practices of four African American grandmothers who raised grandchildren who successfully graduated high school. The goal is to use discourse to determine the constructed meanings of their personal acts of grandmothering as it relates to academic success.

#### **Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an African American grandmother that has successfully raised grandchildren in an urban school district.

#### **How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**

Four people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study.

#### **What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?**

None, the alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

#### **What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

Your participation in this study will be 60- 90 minutes. The procedures you will be asked to perform are as follows:

The visit will last 60-90 minutes. During the visit I will ask questions from an interview protocol/questionnaire. In order to get exact information from you, and increase the strength of the study, you will be audio recorded in the 60-90 minute interview session.

Your name will be pre-coded to the recording that will be used to record the interview session. The transcriptions (writing down from the recording what you said) will also be coded in order to further protect your confidentiality.

Written reports may entail the use of quoted material. At the conclusion of this study, the information gathered, identifiable only by subject number, will be stored in a locked file that only I, and the Principal Investigator Novella Carter will be able to access.

**Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?**

The researcher will make an audio recording during the study so that your responses to the questions posed will be accurately recorded. If you do not give permission for the audio recording to be obtained, you cannot participate in this study.

Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for [photographs/audio/video recordings] to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

**Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing are no more/greater than risks than you would come across in everyday life.

**Are There Any Benefits To Me?**

There is no direct benefit to you by participating in this study. What the researchers find out from this study may help to enlighten educators, school leaders, and policy makers regarding the plight of the African American students raised by grandmothers in urban school districts. African American grandmothers raising grandchildren can use this research to gain insight from existing African American grandmothers raising grandchildren by reflecting upon their own experiences.

**Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

**Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

**Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who will have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and this consent form will be stored in locked file cabinet.



**Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may contact me Andrea D. Cain to tell about a concern or complaint about this research at

281-467-7921 or [trenton@tamu.edu](mailto:trenton@tamu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to provide input regarding research, or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A & M University Human Subjects Protection Program office by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on you.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.**

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Participants Signature

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Date

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Printed Name

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Date

**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation

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Signature of Presenter

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Date

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Printed Name

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Date

## APPENDIX D

### TABLES

TABLE 1.A: PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age when grandmothering began</b>	<b>Age at interview</b>	<b>Age of grandchildren when grandmothering began</b>	<b>Cause for new living arrangement</b>
<b>Carla the Compassionate</b>	<b>30 years old</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>2, 5, and 7 years old</b>	<b>divorce and drug abuse</b>
<b>Stella the Steadfast</b>	<b>34 years old</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>at birth</b>	<b>delivery and drug abuse</b>
<b>Anna the Activist</b>	<b>42 years old</b>	<b>“Senior Citizen”</b>	<b>birth, 12 and 13 years old</b>	<b>disease, delivery, drugs abuse, and detention</b>
<b>Irene the Industrious</b>	<b>38 years old</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>3 months, 2 ½ , and 10 years old</b>	<b>divorce detention, and drugs abuse</b>

**TABLE 1.B: MAJOR THEMES**

